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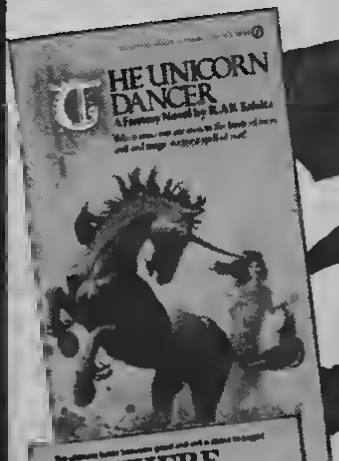
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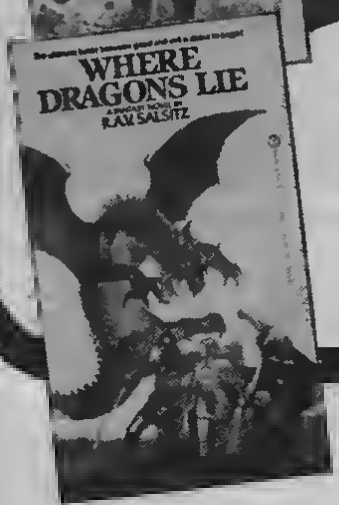
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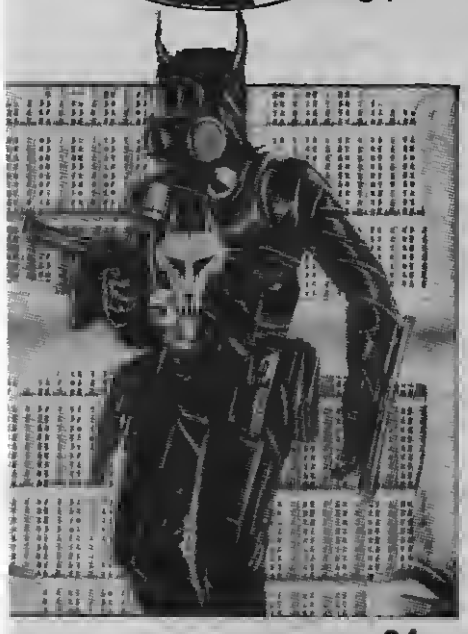
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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

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EDITORIAL



NEW WRITERS

Max Planck first introduced the quantum theory in 1900. The quantum theory was so revolutionary, involved such a reorganization of mental attitude as far as physics was concerned, that it divides the science into two sections. Physics before 1900 is called "classical physics"; physics after 1900 is "modern physics."

Nevertheless, quantum theory was not immediately or enthusiastically accepted. Most physicists (especially those who were advanced in years and experience and renown) found it impossible to abandon their classical mind-set. Even Planck himself had trouble thinking of quantum theory as anything but a mathematical trick. It was not until 1905, when Albert Einstein, then twenty-six years old, showed how quantum theory could explain the photoelectric effect when classical physics could not, that quantum theory was forced into acceptance.

Even so, Planck is reported to have said, in a moment of despondency, that the only way in which a new scientific theory can be accepted is to wait patiently for all the old scientists to die.

This is not entirely true, of course, but one can easily find examples of first-class, top-notch scientists who reach a mental stage of immobility as they grow old. Lord Kelvin, an absolutely brilliant physicist, found himself, in the last decade of his life, unable to accept the exciting discovery of radioactivity. Ernest Rutherford, probably the greatest nuclear experimentalist who ever lived, was quite certain toward the end of his life that all talk of usable nuclear power was "moonshine."

I like to call this "the principle of the immobility of success." (Others call it "Clarke's Law," because someone named Arthur C. Clarke —whoever he might be—once said, "When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.")

Whatever you call it, this principle of the immobility of success probably holds for all human endeavors to some extent. Thus, it is my contention that a science fiction writer tends to cling to the style of writing and the type of story he (or

she—please consider my references as applying to either sex even when, for convenience, I make use of the masculine pronoun) developed as a youngster. His very success seems to make it impossible for him to budge from the spot.

This is not always completely true, of course. Sometimes a writer of some decades of experience is influenced by the changing atmosphere of the field to alter the nature of his own work (perhaps unconsciously, rather than deliberately). If so, the change may be helpful to his continuing career but it is usually comparatively small and the writer's traditional style shines clearly through.

It is also possible that a writer, sensing change about him, deliberately tries to write in a radically new fashion. This (it seems to me) can be disastrous, for it may produce the same effect we get when a sexagenarian decides to dress in the new teen-age styles.

I might as well use myself as an example. My formative decades as a writer were in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1940s, I wrote my Foundation stories. In the 1950s, I wrote my robot novels. In the 1960s and 1970s, the field changed radically and, since I had no intention of trying to attempt to fit the square peg of my writing into the round hole of the "new wave," I began to turn most of my attention to non-fiction.

When, in the 1980s, I was persuaded to return to science fiction in a massive way, I knowingly and

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deliberately continued the type of writing I did in the 1940s and 1950s. I was perfectly aware that it would be derided as "old-fashioned" or "passé"—and some critics have used even more forcefully derogatory adjectives—but I felt I had no real choice. Fortunately, the readers (even those who weren't born till well after I had written and published the stories and novels of my youth) flocked to my books with enthusiasm. That greatly relieved me, for I suffer from the immobility of success. I lack the ability, and I *certainly* lack the desire, to budge from the literary style of my earlier youth.

But if writers such as I persist in writing "classical science fiction" rather than "modern science fiction," how is science fiction going to advance? Following Planck's dictum, must we wait for all the old writers to die?

That takes too long, actually. I can think of several leading lights in the field (including me) who have been writing for a long, long time, and who cavalierly dismiss any suggestion that they either die or retire.

Then what about the other side of the coin? Why not concentrate on the young writers, the new writers, those who have radically novel styles and fashions that are being forged in the stress and heat of the 1980s? It is they, after all, who will be at the cutting edge of the field, right?

Right! —But there are problems.

Every once in a while I get a letter from an aspiring science fiction writer who wants to know if I have any hints that can put him on the proper course. I don't have any of the hints he wants, of course, for he probably expects me to tell him to make a certain incantation over the manuscript before he mails it off and that it will then surely be accepted.

I am always reminded, on such occasions, of the tale of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who was asked by a young would-be composer for hints on symphony-writing. Mozart said, "You are young. Start with something very simple and work your way up to symphonies."

"But, Herr Mozart," said the youngster, "you wrote symphonies when you were considerably younger than I am now."

"Ah," said Mozart, "but I didn't ask anybody for hints."

Well, I can't quite bring myself to say anything like that, so I generally give those who ask me something I call "the three hints of Asimov."

1. Read as much contemporary science fiction as possible so that you will learn what science fiction is all about right now.

2. Write as much science fiction as possible because you need the practice.

3. Cultivate a very thick skin so that you will survive the disappointment and frustration you will undoubtedly have to cope with.

That's the way I managed, and let no one think that I was "lucky" and that I "had it easy." After I sold

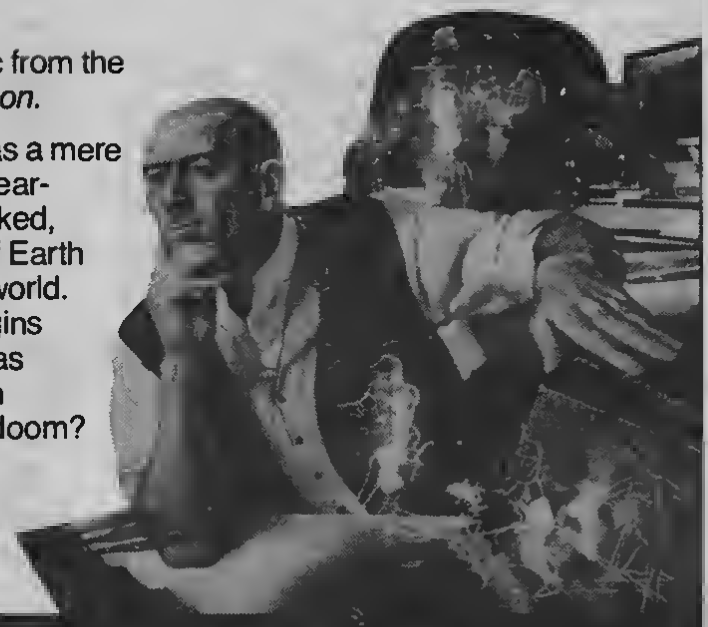
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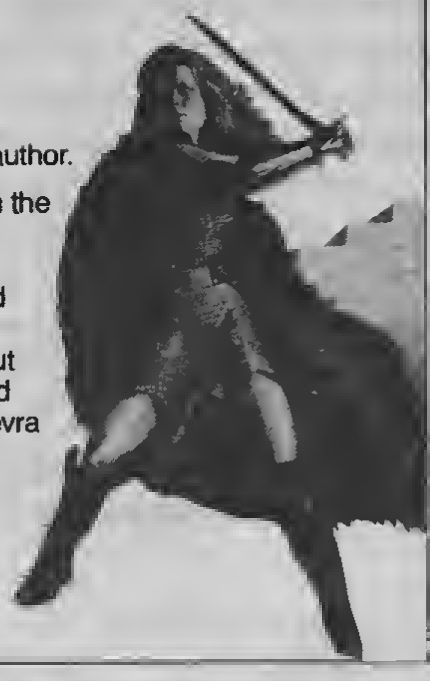
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my first science fiction story it took exactly twenty years of constant reading and writing before I could actually make a good living as a science fiction writer.

Why is this?

Well, some of the reasons are obvious. For instance, it isn't at all likely that a new writer is going to write a publishable story. Even if a new writer is copiously talented, talent is not enough. One also has to have technique and judgment, and such things come only with experience. It takes time.

Yes, but suppose the talent shines through. Suppose the technique is a bit crude, the plotting a bit obvious, the characters a bit cardboard, but suppose it is obvious that, with time, the writer is going to develop into a major influence in the field.

The sad fact is, though, that editors don't always recognize the fact that talent is shining through. —And even if they do, they're in business to make money, and few editors are willing to lose money on a book by a worthy new writer just to encourage him, when it is so much safer to publish a book by an established writer (such as me) that is so sure to sell that it is money in the bank for everyone.

What is needed, then, is for some publisher to put out books that place the accent on new and comparatively young authors, and Joel Davis has started just such a line. It is to be referred to as "Isaac Asimov Presents," but needless to say it is not I who will be doing most of the work. My name will, Joel thinks, attract attention to the books as it did to this magazine when it first started, but he knows, as I do, that I lack the time and (more important) the ability to do the editorial work needed. That will fall into the capable hands of our Chestertonian editor, Gardner Dozois, and our sweet managing editor, Sheila Williams.

Naturally, we are not going to publish books just because they have been written by new young writers. What we are looking for are *good* books by new young writers; books that would otherwise be neglected because they show some (non-fatal) signs of inexperience, or because established publishers simply won't take the chance on authors without "names."

It's a gamble, of course, and it's not likely we will make a great deal of money out of this new project, barring the lightning-stroke of an unexpected runaway bestseller, but we hope that, if it works at all, we will be promoting the careers of some of the future stars of science fiction and that we will help science fiction advance and change with the times, as it should.

That would be quite enough for us. ●



LETTERS

Dear Gardner,

Joe Haldeman's essay on the theme of war in literature (April 1986) may very well be the best thing of its kind yet written. The same issue features an unusually powerful anti-war story by Lucius Shepard. I certainly don't quarrel with either. Let us stipulate that in this day and age every decent person abhors war and wishes it could be abolished as smallpox has been.

However, deploring it won't make it go away. Pronouncements like Isaac Asimov's (same issue), in which he equates it with crime, only confuse the issue. Historically, general opposition to war—all wars—is a very recent thing. Pacifistic individuals and religions were around, but until lately societies as a whole took for granted that war is a part of life. Philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas tried to distinguish between just and unjust wars; jurists such as Hugo Grotius tried to get some mitigation of the horror; but the soldier's trade was considered both honorable and necessary.

After all, most nations, including our own, were born in war. Many owe their continued existence to it, Israel being a conspicuous modern example. Few people today think it was wrong to fight Hitler, and even to continue fighting him long after he would gladly have negotiated peace. World War II was as terrible as Vietnam, and the aftermath of the latter has shown that our cause there was probably as righteous. The trouble is, that was not a *popular* war.

By definition crime consists of the performance of illegal acts. War is not illegal. It is, in fact, an institution, built into society, like income tax. No matter how subversive of decency and common sense we may think them to be, they are authorized by the law and are practiced because they serve what is perceived as the ends of government—ends which are not invariably evil (for example, the space program). Calling them names doesn't help a bit.

Well, our species has pretty much dismantled a few undesirable institutions. Chattel slavery comes to mind. However, that was only done when it had ceased to pay, and then after a long and sometimes bloody effort. Since it is governments that wage war—individuals and private organizations merely feud with each other—I doubt we will get rid of it until all governments everywhere are cut down to strictly municipal levels and strictly housekeeping functions. This is a utopian vision, of course, and maybe

there is another, realistic way which has never occurred to anybody. A few twentieth-century thinkers have made some interesting preliminary attempts at scientific study of the phenomenon, e.g., I. A. Richards and Bertrand de Jouvenel. Let us encourage more such efforts; they cost little and just barely might produce a revolutionary insight. Meanwhile science fiction can help keep its readers aware of some of the infinite ramifications of the problem, and perhaps from time to time come up with a suggestion.

Regards,

Poul Anderson
Las Palomas

Gee, Poul, nothing any nation does is a crime by its own laws. Nothing Hitler did was a crime by Hitler's laws. No war ever fought was considered criminal by the nation fighting it. It was always a war of defense, or of national honor, or what not. Hitler invaded Poland because, he said, the Poles attacked Germany, and the Germans believed him. Right now, any nation can destroy the entire Earth by nuclear bombardment and, if it is in the name of national security, it is not a crime—to that nation. There's something wrong here, Poul. Can it possibly be we need a new definition of "crime"? And as for calling names, Reagan is very good at that. Talk to him, Poul. Tell him it doesn't do any good.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor & Staff:

Your April issue was as hot as they come. I found something to delight in with every story, which happens to me about as often as I find a record album of solid hits. However, particularly stunning was Joe Haldeman's Viewpoint Article "Science Fiction and War." What Haldeman had to say regarding the sort of idiotic fiction that glorifies slaughter is something I cannot help but second. [For all you cutiepies out there who are reading any "Gold Eagle" books, this is where you get off.] Nobody has dealt with the grit, the gore, and the hopelessness of battle better than Haldeman. His words ring true for that reason; his position unassailable. It is a great shame that the let's-legislate-morality Pornography Panel who are right now still trying to figure out the correct, acceptable term for a bare buttocks, couldn't have ignored *Playboy* and *Penthouse* and concentrated on the truly obscene literature that Haldeman speaks of. Thanks, Joe.

Best,

Greg Frost
Philadelphia, PA

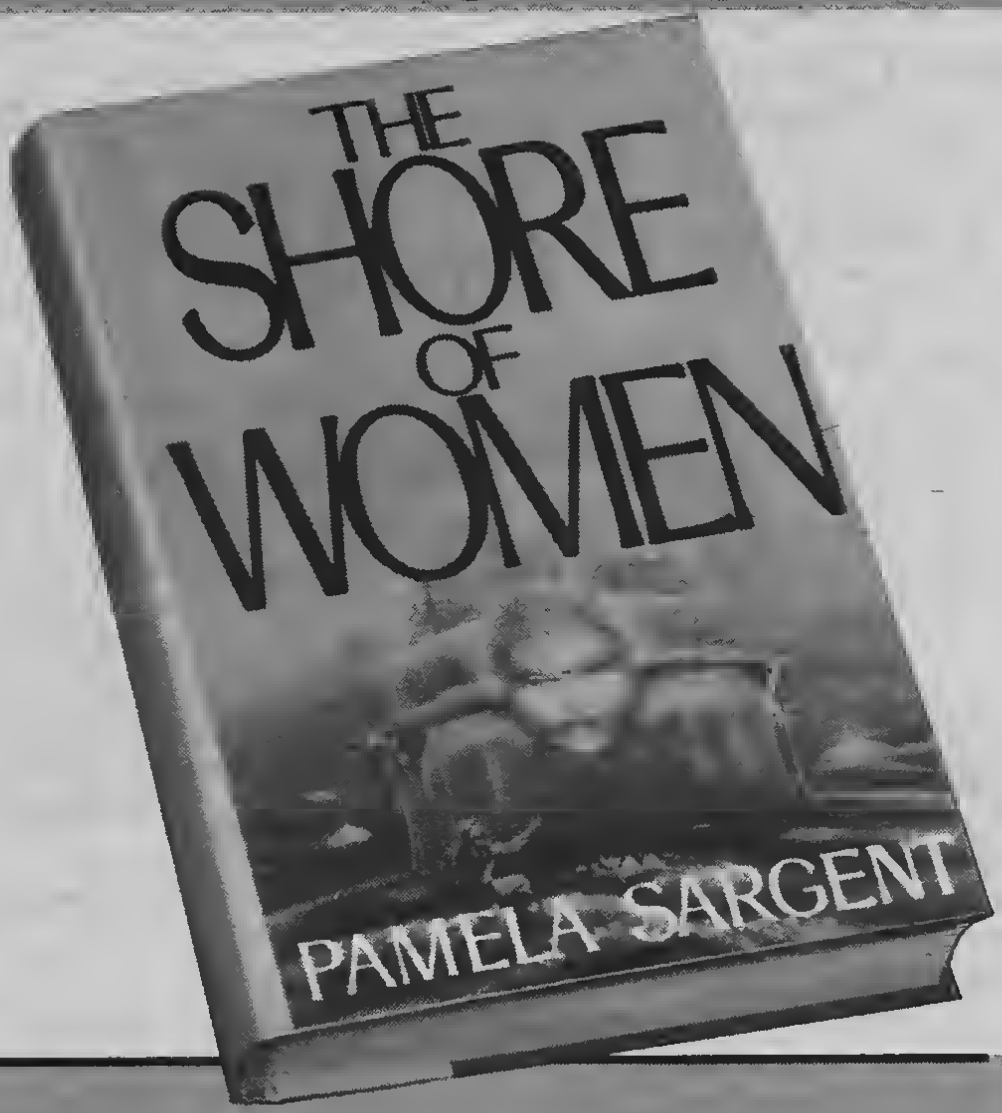
I don't exactly find pornography very edifying, but given my choice between pornography and war, I'd choose the former. In fact, given my choice between pornography and censorship, I'd choose the former. —So, I'm on your side.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I would like to personally thank Baird Searles for years of entertaining, informative, and most of all, useful SF book reviews. He's doing a fantastic job, but no one seems to notice. This is a great in-

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justice. In my opinion, he and A.J. Budrys are the best reviewers in the business. Would you agree?

Now to the original inspiration for this letter. I beg to differ with you using "Chestertonian" as the adjective to describe new editor Gardner Dozois. Yes, Mr. Dozois looks like G. K. Chesterton. But I'll bet that most of your readers have never seen a picture of good ol' G. K. Why not use "Wellesian" in honor of Orson Welles? Granted the physical similarity is not quite as acute, but almost everyone knows what Orson Welles looks like. Besides, "Wellesian" is shorter and more aesthetically appealing (at least to me). So how about it?

Anyway, thanks for letting me put in my two cents' worth.

Dennis Pupello
Tampa, FL

The difficulty with Wellesian is that science fiction readers may think of H. G. Wells to begin with and that would be utterly misleading. Of course, as I get to know Gardner better and better, I may switch to "jovial" as his adjective for he does seem to be that well-known cliché, the jolly fat man. —And don't forget sweet Sheila (who is neither Chestertonian nor Wellesian).

—Isaac Asimov

Actually, what this seems to prove is that all fat men with beards look alike, particularly if they're wearing business suits and ties!

—Gardner Dozois

To the Editor:

I am planning to catalogue my science fiction/fantasy library in a database on my personal computer. I want to include a list of concepts contained in each book that are significant factors in the story, i.e. genetic engineering, telepathy, Norse gods, L5 stations, etc. If any of your readers have already completed such a project, I am interested in hearing from them. If anyone has created the equivalent of a taxonomical hierarchy, I am especially interested.

Thanks,

Neil Ratzlaff
140 Locksley Ave.
San Francisco, CA 94122

Ah, in the old days when I was young and hadn't gotten into this morass of writing day and night, I would have wanted to do this sort of thing. Of course, I would have had to work with index cards, since in my antediluvian days, a computer was someone who used his fingers to help himself add 6 and 5.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner,

I've been admiring the progress of *IAsfm* under your aegis. Each issue has been remarkable. A couple of them have been truly splendid. *IAsfm* today is the finest SF periodical I've seen during my professional career.

Latest issue kept me up all night just thinking about it. Have nothing to show you now, but felt driven to write as such excellence must not go unremarked.

Best,

Bruce Sterling
Austin, TX

Gardner thanks you, and I thank you. The beauteous Shawna was a hard act to follow, but Gardner is managing nicely, I think.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

I truly enjoy your magazine! I read the entire April issue—cover to cover. Keep up the good work!

"Panzerboy," by W. J. Williams was excellent. There are some original approaches to simile that got my attention. Because I am an electrical engineer, the high tech aura pervading this story sparks my imagination like heat lightning in a clear summer sky.

But I have one negative criticism: Unnecessary use of taboo words. They offend me. Would it be possible to stimulate an even greater mastery of the language by requiring writers to use socially acceptable substitutes? Please accept this as an encouragement to delete words that offend: specifically, the word derived from Old English "Fok" (it used to mean "to strike"). Encountering that word in the deepest recesses of my mind, as I dream-state my way through your excellent examples of literary genius, forces discontinuity like a termite ridden rung rupturing as I climb briskly to the sky.

I plead with you to up-build our failing society by deleting certain words. The Creator will bless you for it! (Also, would that Clarke fellow even consider using similar language??)

Sincerely,

Kevin E. Bentch
Abilene, TX

The tabooness of words varies with time and place. In some places the use of a person's "real" name is taboo. The use of the word "God" is taboo and is replaced by "Lord." The use of familiar words for excrement and sexual intercourse becomes taboo and is replaced by a variety of euphemisms, each one of which becomes taboo in turn. What exists is the thing itself; the words you use are human inventions and should not be taken too seriously.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In the September 1985 issue of your magazine you and Poul Anderson have a go at the near term nuclear weapons controversy with predictable arguments. The problem, I suggest, lies not in the star wars but in ourselves, the present undiscriminating aggressiveness of the human race.

No matter.

What I miss in the argument is a description of an attainable, exciting, and desirable peaceful state of humanity and how to get there.

The science fiction field has a terrible record in this regard. One would think that with all of these clever people ringing the changes on varieties of social systems, logics, intellectual mutations, and what have you, at least a few stories would point out feasible roads back to Eden.

Instead, the science fiction view of the future is heavy on conflict, death and destruction, on an ever expanding scale. There are anthologies of stories on future war but not on future peace. But then don't

the writing schools tell us that a good story has to have lots of conflict in it? Or is there a lack of imagination in the field these days?

But science fiction writers are not alone in being unable to plot constructive paths past a few tomorrows. I don't find the non-fiction books on the restraint of destructive violence particularly convincing.

Well, we got space flight rather along the lines anticipated by the better writers of your generation, Dr. Asimov, and mine. (I am senior to you.) Probably because the "better writers" had a good feeling for what had to be done, if not the technical details of how to engineer it.

Why not make a thorough search to locate, collect and publish anthologies of the relatively few pilot stories that work out desirable future states for the human race and plausible ways of getting there. With more options defined for the long run perhaps it will be easier to agree on ways to work past presently perceived potential terminal states. There will be, of course, many opinions on "desirable" states, and properly so. But there aren't that many good stories no matter what one's opinion of "desirable" may be.

I rather like some of the visions of H.G. Wells, in particular "Men Like Gods," although his ideas of how to get there are not as likely as his goals are admirable. But he shows human aggressiveness turned outward against the frontiers of knowledge and away from race suicide. There are more important things to do in the long run than kill each other in wars. Or otherwise. Then there is Kipling's "As Easy as A.B.C.," and . . .?

Modern stories that qualify? I think of some that don't more easily than some that do. However that's up to the anthologist if one can be found and if a publisher is interested and if . . .

I do suggest that the assumption that "war is the natural state of mankind" is a cop-out. The idea is to encourage those activities that reduce entropy, thus postponing the arrival of chaos. Anyhow anyone who thinks we have big problems now will be overwhelmed by the options that will be offered by genetic engineering.

Know anybody who likes to do anthologies? "Roads Back to Eden" (you can think of a better title) might be a small but necessary step to a good future.

Regards

Herb Weiss
Palos Verdes Penin, CA

Alas for the human race, stories about peaceful Utopias tend to be dull. Stories about conflict tend to be exciting. However, if peaceful Utopias give us something to strive for, conflicts give us something to strive against. Most good stories about war and cruelty make one long for peace and decency, and isn't that what you want?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Company,

I have just finished reading my last issue of *IAsfm*, and on the whole, found the stories within to be of very good quality. The stories I liked the best include "A Falling Star is a Rock From Outer Space,"

"The Great Atlantic Swimming Race," and "Close Encounter With The Deity." Incidentally, "Close Encounters" is slightly reminiscent of your own "The Last Question," my favorite among your short stories.

In some ways, though, I think I liked your magazine better when it first came out. The present offering in your magazine seems to be rather serious stuff, while in the beginning it seemed accented towards more light-hearted material. There is nothing wrong with having serious stories now and then, but there is such a thing as overkill.

By the way, when should we expect to see the sequel to *Foundation's Edge*? I am looking forward to reading the sequel, and in discovering what Golan Tevize finds on Earth. Should be interesting.

In the controversy of "characterization" vs. "ideas," I find that I prefer both. The action in any story is going to revolve around the *people*, so any writer is going to have a tough time avoiding the problem of characterization one way or the other. At the same time, the situation the characters find themselves in will provide the central idea of the story. Admittedly, some writers are more adept at handling the characterization end of the spectrum, while others are more adept at handling the ideas end.

Thanks for a fine magazine. Keep up the good work!

Bill LaFleur
Lacey, WA

The sequel to Foundation's Edge *is* Foundation and Earth *and it should be published about the time*

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DEL REY

#1 In Science Fiction and Fantasy
Published by Ballantine Books

this letter appears. There's something to be said for both light-heartedness and gravity, and we try to get a good mix but we're at the mercy of what is contributed. There are always my George and Azazel stories—I just wish I had time to write more of them.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

I am more interested in the truth than science fiction. And methinks Dr. Asimov is the real author of Judith Tarr's "Pièce De Résistance."

By the great god (good) of truth, whom all should serve, will Dr. Asimov affirm otherwise?

Inquisitively,

Lelah L. Clemens
200 S. Bolury
Ada, OK 74820

P.S. But of course there is undoubtedly some (sometimes many) substantive grains of truth in science fiction. "Sweet Mystery of Life" indeed.

I do affirm otherwise. Judith Tarr's story was by Judith Tarr. If you think that IAsfm *is going to print an Asimov story and not put the Asimov name upon it, you little know Joel Davis.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov (Isaac):

First the good news.

The finest story of the year is "Dinner in Audoghast" by Bruce Sterling, a beautiful recreation of mood, place and setting while foretelling the future history and the only survivor.

Notice how the wonderful artwork on the cover (by J. K. Potter) captures the mood of the story. It is this artwork that I want to draw your attention to. The detail on the columns captures the concept of the culture of the city while the decorated courtier could really be in the household somewhere.

Now the bad news: the artwork for Tanith Lee's "Into Gold" is one of the worst, because it fails to capture the mood of the story, uses a lewd trick that makes me think of fan art or costumes appropriate for science fiction conventions, where they are arty but not for this story. It might make a good cover, but it does the story no justice in my eyes.

Enclosed is an example of a sketch done from the work of Tissot, a painter who actually traveled to the Middle East to do Bible scenes. His detailed costumes capture the mood of the period and are authentically correct. Contrast the two outfits and tell me how much research the two artists have done.

For your general information, Tissot was the artist studied by George Lucas when he wanted a model for the ark in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In addition to the ark of the covenant, I strongly suspect that Leia's hairstyle for *Star Wars* began with the hairstyles of the women in Tissot's paintings.

If you want to see the original paintings (and not my hand sketch) they are shown at the Jewish Museum of New York and are also available in book form from the public library system, which is where I found the paintings for my sketch.

After reading Isaac Asimov's autobiography where he credits much of his learning to his parents' requirement that he read mostly

nonfiction, I have upgraded my reading list to contain more nonfiction. Correspondingly my standards have risen. Furthermore, I am an adult, not a teenager, and I also have higher expectations for this reason. Please try again.

Kindest regards for a prosperous year.

Sincerely yours,

Dale A. Kagan
Washington, DC

It wasn't my parents who steered me toward non-fiction; it was the public library. The rule for kids (at least in those days) was that they could only take out two books at a time, and only one of them could be fiction. I found the restriction a chafing one at the time, but I would rather read non-fiction than nothing and the time came when I was very glad of it.

—Isaac Asimov

Unfortunately, "Into Gold" was not *set in the Middle East during the Biblical period, but rather in Celtic Britian after the withdrawal of the Roman Legions, many hundreds of years later; certainly enough time to justify changes in costumes.*

—Gardner Dozois

Dr. Asimov,

Hear! Hear! As an "intelligent youngster" (there will be argument in some circles as to that label re me!) who encountered science fiction and fantasy at the age of twelve (I will soon be eighteen) I agree wholeheartedly with your editorial in the July 1986 issue of *IAsfm*.

Since I feel "a good book is a good book" regardless of the audience it is aimed at, if indeed it is aimed at any such beast, I have never balked at reading so-called adult science fiction if, as you have stated, the ideas presented are done in a clear manner. Actually I have to confess that some of the ideas presented in "adult" material are much more interesting than the often "space-opera" oriented juvenile stuff which a person can also get, minus the ray-guns and BEMs, from adventure stories. There are exceptions of course and lots of juvenile fiction is interesting (so lower your hackles you legit. juvenile writers!).

Thank you Doctor Asimov for voicing your opinion so lucidly. Surely it too falls into the category of "a good read is a good read" . . . Sincerely,

Jennifer Read
R.R. 3
Bobcaygeon,
Ontario KOM 1AO.
Canada

I welcome your agreement, and now that you are eighteen I suppose it is safe to speculate on what you can possibly mean when you say "a good read is a good read."

—Isaac Asimov



GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

It may seem to you that I'm about to suggest that you indulge in what, for lack of a better word, we will call "whimsy." And surely "whimsy" has to be one of those forgotten concepts of the twentieth century. Anyone who has spent much time sampling popular media, from the cartoons where everyone talks as though they have lockjaw to the graceless, lead-footed "action shows" on at night, knows that, if it's not quite extinct, "whimsy" is certainly an endangered species.

Which makes this new program from Activision all the more remarkable. It is called the Little Computer People Project (Activision, Inc. $29.95), and while it may not change your life, it certainly will throw a few curves into it, at least for a while.

The Little Computer People Project comes packaged as a magazine containing research reporting on an absolutely amazing discovery. There are "little people" living inside of computers. Oh yeah. You get a magazine called *Modern Computer People*, which includes a note from the publisher giving some chatty background on the research crew who made the "discovery." That's followed by a colorful history of the project, including that felicitous moment when designer David Crane uncovered the little guy living inside his computer.

But then, for all the disbelievers and scoffers, there is the "house-on-a-disc," a two-and-a-half story computer condo designed to lure *your* computer person out of *your* computer and into full view.

So you load the program. (Perhaps, even, feeling a bit silly. This is whimsy, after all.) You see the house. A bedroom, full bath, living room (with fireplace), a nice eat-in kitchen, a fully equipped recreation room with TV, stereo, piano, typewriter, and games. And, of course, a computer room.

You enter the date and the time as well as your name and then you are informed that this is research session 1. And, after a while, a portentous moment. The little computer person arrives. He walks around, inspecting the rooms, and, gasp, leaves. But not to worry, because soon he returns with a suitcase and his dog.

Your LCP has moved in.

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Now there are all sorts of things you can tell him, perhaps to put on a record, or maybe to build a fire. And sometimes the LCP will nod and do just that. At other times, he won't. He is, after all, his own person.

But lest you get upset, he'll type a note to you explaining that he has lots of interests and he can't always do what you want.

Fair enough. These days, we all need a little give-and-take in our relationships.

But it works both ways. Sometimes he goes up to his rec room and opens up his game drawer. Favorite games are card war, poker, and anagrams. You can play with the LCP and he'll love it. But should you choose not to play with him, the LCP taps the inside of the monitor. Eventually, he puts his games back and returns back to his other activities.

You do have certain responsibilities with your LCP. Food must be delivered (press "control F" for a food package) and water replenished ("control W"). Also, don't forget to send some food for the dog.

More importantly, as you will learn, your LCP has emotional needs. If ignored for a long time, he can become more than a bit crestfallen. But play a hand of poker, or send him a new record, or ruffle his hair, and he's strolling around, happy as a lark.

But mostly, you watch him.

Not all the time, mind you. I kept the program on most of the day just, well, sort of curious what he'd do, glancing at it while I worked. My person, who told me his name was David, played piano a lot and seemed to enjoy working on his computer. He got *lots* of phone calls, but I couldn't understand what he said. After watching him for a while I wondered whether he'd ever use his shower and, sure enough, while my family was watching TV, we heard this big hissing noise.

"Daddy," my three-year-old daughter announced, running into my office, "David's taking a shower."

My son even got up at midnight once to see if David was in bed yet. (He wasn't. He was still hacking away at the computer.)

Of course, each LCP is unique and Activision includes a special research report form for you to record your discoveries about your LCP.

David, meanwhile, typed a note to me saying that he loved the house; it's so roomy, he told me, that he thinks he just has to have a party.

I can hardly wait. ●

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About L. RON HUBBARD's

Writers of the Future Contest

by Algis Budrys

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of $500, $750 and $1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of $4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of $5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

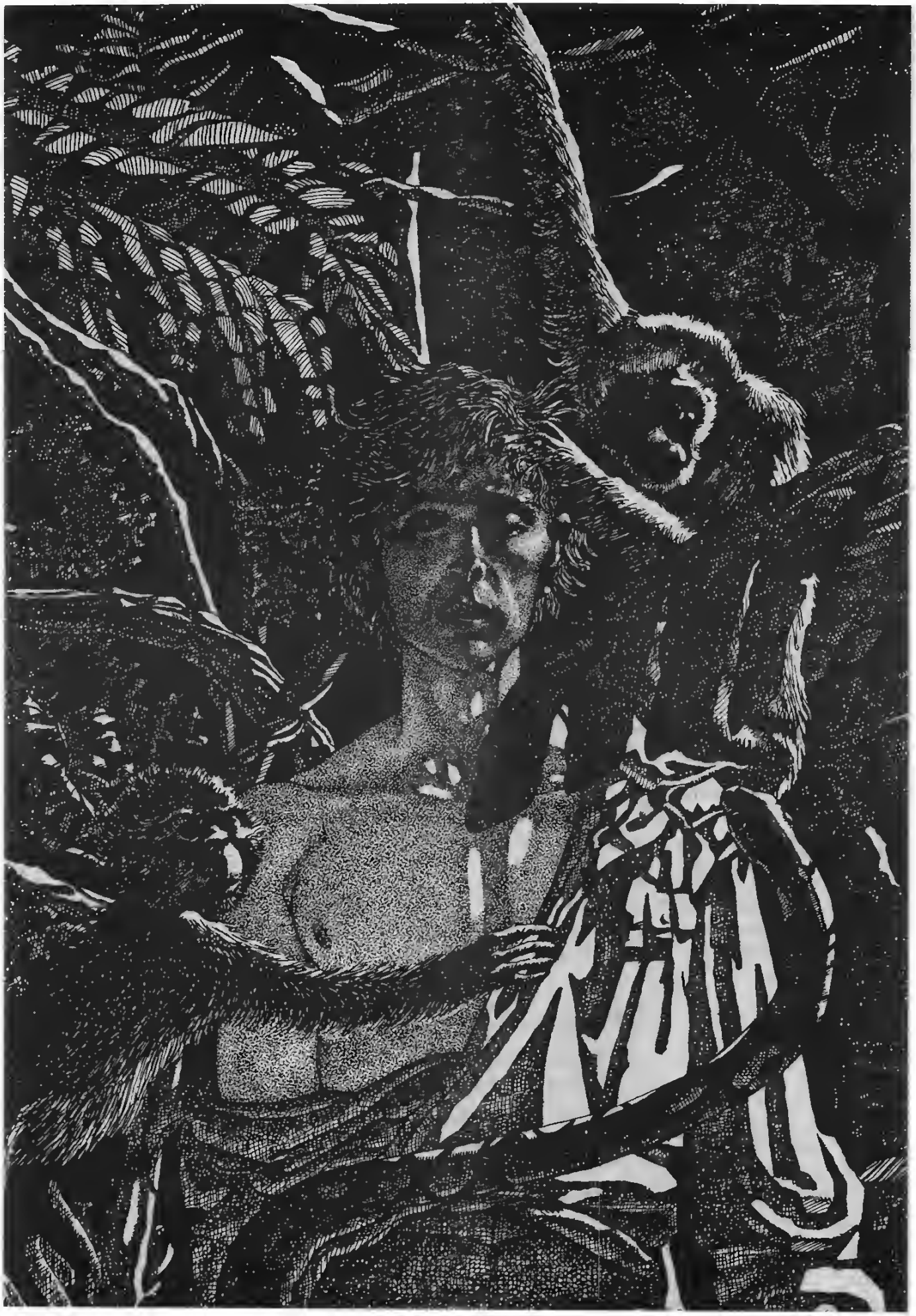
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Or, you can find the rules—and examples of winning stories, plus informative essays by some of the judges—in either of the Writers of the Future anthologies. They're original paperbacks and cost $3.95 each.

Good luck.

—Algis Budrys



by Orson Scott Card

AMERICA

The author's novel, *Ender's Game* (Tor Books), won both the 1985 Hugo and Nebula awards. A sequel, *Speaker for the Dead*, was published by Tor in 1986. Both novels were set in a future of space wars, space travel, aliens, and colonization. "America" comes closer to home, and Mr. Card was able to draw upon his firsthand knowledge of Brazil, where he served a mission for the Church of the Latter Day Saints from 1971 to 1973, to create this powerful story.



art: Janet Aulisio

Sam Monson and Anamari Boagente had two encounters in their lives, forty years apart. The first encounter lasted for several weeks in the high Amazon jungle, the village of Agualinda. The second was for only an hour near the ruins of the Glen Canyon Dam, on the border between Navaho country and the State of Deseret.

When they met the first time, Sam was a scrawny teenager from Utah and Anamari was a middle-aged spinster Indian from Brazil. When they met the second time, he was governor of Deseret, the last European state in America, and she was, to some people's way of thinking, the mother of God. It never occurred to anyone that they had ever met before, except me. I saw it plain as day, and pestered Sam until he told me the whole story. Now Sam is dead, and she's long gone, and I'm the only one who knows the truth. I thought for a long time that I'd take this story untold to my grave, but I see now that I can't do that. The way I see it, I won't be allowed to die until I write this down. All my real work was done long since, so why else am I alive? I figure the land has kept me breathing so I can tell the story of its victory, and it has kept *you* alive so you can hear it. Gods are like that. It isn't enough for them to run everything. They want to be famous, too.

Agualinda, Amazonas

Passengers were nothing to her. Anamari only cared about helicopters when they brought medical supplies. This chopper carried a precious packet of benaxidene; Anamari barely noticed the skinny, awkward boy who sat by the crates, looking hostile. Another Yanqui who doesn't want to be stuck out in the jungle. Nothing new about that. Norteamericanos were almost invisible to Anamari by now. They came and went.

It was the Brazilian government people she had to worry about, the petty bureaucrats suffering through years of virtual exile in Manaus, working out their frustrations by being petty tyrants over the helpless Indians. No I'm sorry we don't have any more penicillin, no more syringes, what did you do with the AIDS vaccine we gave you three years ago? Do you think we're made of money here? Let them come to town if they want to get well. There's a hospital in São Paulo de Olivença, send them there, we're not going to turn you into a second hospital out there in the middle of nowhere, not for a village of a hundred filthy Baniwas, it's not as if you're a doctor, you're just an old withered up Indian woman yourself, you never graduated from the medical schools, we can't spare medicines for you. It made them feel so important, to decide whether or not an Indian child would live or die. As often as not they passed sentence of death by refusing to send supplies. It made them feel powerful as God.

Anamari knew better than to protest or argue—it would only make that bureaucrat likelier to kill again in the future. But sometimes, when

the need was great and the medicine was common, Anamari would go to the Yanqui geologists and ask if they had this or that. Sometimes they did. What she knew about Yanquis was that if they had some extra, they would share, but if they didn't, they wouldn't lift a finger to get any. They were not tyrants like the Brazilian bureaucrats. They just didn't give a damn. They were there to make money.

That was what Anamari saw when she looked at the sullen light-haired boy in the helicopter—another Norteamericano, just like all the other Norteamericanos, only younger.

She had the benaxidene, and so she immediately began spreading word that all the Baniwas should come for injections. It was a disease that had been introduced during the war between Guyana and Venezuela two years ago; as usual, most of the victims were not citizens of either country, just the Indios of the jungle, waking up one morning with their joints stiffening, hardening until no movement was possible. Benaxidene was the antidote, but you had to have it every few months or your joints would stiffen up again. As usual, the bureaucrats had diverted a shipment and there were a dozen Baniwas bedridden in the village. As usual, one or two of the Indians would be too far gone for the cure; one or two of their joints would be stiff for the rest of their lives. As usual, Anamari said little as she gave the injections, and the Baniwas said less to her.

It was not until the next day that Anamari had time to notice the young Yanqui boy wandering around the village. He was wearing rumpled white clothing, already somewhat soiled with the greens and browns of life along the rivers of the Amazon jungle. He showed no sign of being interested in anything, but an hour into her rounds, checking on the results of yesterday's benaxidene treatments, she became aware that he was following her.

She turned around in the doorway of the government-built hovel and faced him. "O que é?" she demanded. What do you want?

To her surprise, he answered in halting Portuguese. Most of these Yanquis never bothered to learn the language at all, expecting her and everybody else to speak English. "Posso ajudar?" he asked. Can I help?

"Não," she said. "Mas pode olhar." You can watch.

He looked at her in bafflement.

She repeated her sentence slowly, enunciating clearly. "Pode olhar."

"Eu?" Me?

"Você, sim. And I can speak English."

"I don't want to speak English."

"Tanto faz," she said. Makes no difference.

He followed her into the hut. It was a little girl, lying naked in her own feces. She had palsy from a bout with meningitis years ago, when she was an infant, and Anamari figured that the girl would probably be

one of the ones for whom the benaxidene came too late. That's how things usually worked—the weak suffer most. But no, her joints were flexing again, and the girl smiled at them, that heartbreakingly happy smile that made palsy victims so beautiful at times.

So. Some luck after all, the benaxidene had been in time for her. Anamari took the lid off the clay waterjar that stood on the one table in the room, and dipped one of her clean rags in it. She used it to wipe the girl, then lifted her frail, atrophied body and pulled the soiled sheet out from under her. On impulse, she handed the sheet to the boy.

"Leva fora," she said. And, when he didn't understand, "Take it outside."

He did not hesitate to take it, which surprised her. "Do you want me to wash it?"

"You could shake off the worst of it," she said. "Out over the garden in back. I'll wash it later."

He came back in, carrying the wadded-up sheet, just as she was leaving. "All done here," she said. "We'll stop by my house to start that soaking. I'll carry it now."

He didn't hand it to her. "I've got it," he said. "Aren't you going to give her a clean sheet?"

"There are only four sheets in the village," she said. "Two of them are on my bed. She won't mind lying on the mat. I'm the only one in the village who cares about linens. I'm also the only one who cares about this girl."

"She likes you," he said.

"She smiles like that at everybody."

"So maybe she likes everybody."

Anamari grunted and led the way to her house. It was two government hovels pushed together. The one served as her clinic, the other as her home. Out back she had two metal washtubs. She handed one of them to the Yanqui boy, pointed at the rainwater tank, and told him to fill it. He did. It made her furious.

"What do you want!" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said.

"Why do you keep hanging around!"

"I thought I was helping." His voice was full of injured pride.

"I don't need your help." She forgot that she had meant to leave the sheet to soak. She began rubbing it on the washboard.

"Then why did you ask me to . . ."

She did not answer him, and he did not complete the question.

After a long time he said, "You were trying to get rid of me, weren't you?"

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DAW SCIENCE FICTION

"What do you want here?" she said. "Don't I have enough to do, without a Norteamericano *boy* to look after?"

Anger flashed in his eyes, but he did not answer until the anger was gone. "If you're tired of scrubbing, I can take over."

She reached out and took his hand, examined it for a moment. "Soft hands," she said. "Lady hands. You'd scrape your knuckles on the washboard and bleed all over the sheet."

Ashamed, he put his hands in his pockets. A parrot flew past him, dazzling green and red; he turned in surprise to look at it. It landed on the rainwater tank. "Those sell for a thousand dollars in the States," he said.

Of course the Yanqui boy evaluates everything by price. "Here they're free," she said. "The Baniwas eat them. And wear the feathers."

He looked around at the other huts, the scraggly gardens. "The people are very poor here," he said. "The jungle life must be hard."

"Do you think so?" she snapped. "The jungle is very kind to these people. It has plenty for them to eat, all year. The Indians of the Amazon did not know they were poor until Europeans came and made them buy pants, which they couldn't afford, and build houses, which they couldn't keep up, and plant gardens. Plant gardens! In the midst of this magnificent Eden. The jungle life was good. The Europeans made them poor."

"Europeans?" asked the boy.

"Brazilians. They're all Europeans. Even the black ones have turned European. Brazil is just another European country, speaking a European language. Just like you Norteamericanos. You're Europeans too."

"I was born in America," he said. "So were my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents."

"But your bis-bis-avós, they came on a boat."

"That was a long time ago," he said.

"A long time!" She laughed. "I am a pure Indian. For ten thousand generations I belong to this land. You are a stranger here. A fourth-generation stranger."

"But I'm a stranger who isn't afraid to touch a dirty sheet," he said. He was grinning defiantly.

That was when she started to like him. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Fifteen," he said.

"Your father's a geologist?"

"No. He heads up the drilling team. They're going to sink a test well here. He doesn't think they'll find anything, though."

"They will find plenty of oil," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Because I dreamed it," she said. "Bulldozers cutting down the trees,

making an airstrip, and planes coming and going. They'd never do that, unless they found oil. Lots of oil."

She waited for him to make fun of the idea of dreaming true dreams. But he didn't. He just looked at her.

So she was the one who broke the silence. "You came to this village to kill time while your father is away from you, on the job, right?"

"No," he said. "I came here because he hasn't started to work yet. The choppers start bringing in equipment tomorrow."

"You would rather be away from your father?"

He looked away. "I'd rather see him in hell."

"This *is* hell," she said, and the boy laughed. "Why did you come here with him?"

"Because I'm only fifteen years old, and he has custody of me this summer."

"Custody," she said. "Like a criminal."

"He's the criminal," he said bitterly.

"And his crime?"

He waited a moment, as if deciding whether to answer. When he spoke, he spoke quietly and looked away. Ashamed. Of his father's crime. "Adultery," he said. The word hung in the air. The boy turned back and looked her in the face again. His face was tinged with red.

Europeans have such transparent skin, she thought. All their emotions show through. She guessed a whole story from his word—a beloved mother betrayed, and now he had to spend the summer with her betrayer. "Is that a *crime*?"

He shrugged. "Maybe not to Catholics."

"You're Protestant?"

He shook his head. "Mormon. But I'm a heretic."

She laughed. "You're a heretic, and your father is an adulterer."

He didn't like her laughter. "And you're a virgin," he said. His words seemed calculated to hurt her.

She stopped scrubbing, stood there looking at her hands. "Also a crime?" she murmured.

"I had a dream last night," he said. "In my dream your name was Anna Marie, but when I tried to call you that, I couldn't. I could only call you by another name."

"What name?" she asked.

"What does it matter? It was only a dream." He was taunting her. He knew she trusted in dreams.

"You dreamed of me, and in the dream my name was Anamari?"

"It's true, isn't it? That *is* your name, isn't it?" He didn't have to add the other half of the question: You *are* a virgin, aren't you?

She lifted the sheet from the water, wrung it out and tossed it to him.

He caught it, vile water spattering his face. He grimaced. She poured the washwater onto the dirt. It spattered mud all over his trousers. He did not step back. Then she carried the tub to the water tank and began to fill it with clean water. "Time to rinse," she said.

"You dreamed about an airstrip," he said. "And I dreamed about you."

"In your dreams you better start to mind your own business," she said.

"I didn't ask for it, you know," he said. "But I followed the dream out to this village, and you turned out to be a dreamer, too."

"That doesn't mean you're going to end up with your pinto between my legs, so you can forget it," she said.

He looked genuinely horrified. "Geez, what are you talking about! That would be fornication! Plus you've got to be old enough to be my mother!"

"I'm forty-two," she said. "If it's any of your business."

"You're *older* than my mother," he said. "I couldn't possibly think of you sexually. I'm sorry if I gave that impression."

She giggled. "You are a very funny boy, Yanqui. First you say I'm a virgin—"

"That was in the dream," he said.

"And then you tell me I'm older than your mother and too ugly to think of me sexually."

He looked ashen with shame. "I'm sorry, I was just trying to make sure you knew that I would never—"

"You're trying to tell me that you're a good boy."

"Yes," he said.

She giggled again. "You probably don't even play with yourself," she said.

His face went red. He struggled to find something to say. Then he threw the wet sheet back at her and walked furiously away. She laughed and laughed. She liked this boy very much.

The next morning he came back and helped her in the clinic all day. His name was Sam Monson, and he was the first European she ever knew who dreamed true dreams. She had thought only Indios could do that. Whatever god it was that gave her dreams to her, perhaps it was the same god giving dreams to Sam. Perhaps that god brought them together here in the jungle. Perhaps it was that god who would lead the drill to oil, so that Sam's father would have to keep him here long enough to accomplish whatever the god had in mind.

It annoyed her that the god had mentioned she was a virgin. That was nobody's business but her own.

Life in the jungle was better than Sam ever expected. Back in Utah, when Mother first told him that he had to go to the Amazon with the old bastard, he had feared the worst. Hacking through thick viney jungles

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WILD CARDS



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with a machete, crossing rivers of piranha in tick-infested dugouts, and always sweat and mosquitos and thick, heavy air. Instead the American oilmen lived in a pretty decent camp, with a generator for electric light. Even though it rained all the time and when it didn't it was so hot you wished it would, it wasn't constant danger as he had feared, and he never had to hack through jungle at all. There were paths, sometimes almost roads, and the thick, vivid green of the jungle was more beautiful than he had ever imagined. He had not realized that the American West was such a desert. Even California, where the old bastard lived when he wasn't traveling to drill wells, even those wooded hills and mountains were grey compared to the jungle green.

The Indians were quiet little people, not headhunters. Instead of avoiding them, like the adult Americans did, Sam found that he could be with them, come to know them, even help them by working with Anamari. The old bastard could sit around and drink his beer with the guys—adultery *and* beer, as if one contemptible sin of the flesh weren't enough—but Sam was actually doing some good here. If there was anything Sam could do to prove he was the opposite of his father, he would do it; and because his father was a weak, carnal, earthy man with no self-control, then Sam had to be a strong, spiritual, intellectual man who did not let any passions of the body rule him. Watching his father succumb to alcohol, remembering how his father could not even last a month away from Mother without having to get some whore into his bed, Sam was proud of his self-discipline. He ruled his body; his body did not rule him.

He was also proud to have passed Anamari's test on the first day. What did he care if human excrement touched his body? He was not afraid to breathe the hot stink of suffering, he was not afraid of the innocent dirt of a crippled child. Didn't Jesus touch lepers? Dirt of the body did not disgust him. Only dirt of the soul.

Which was why his dreams of Anamari troubled him. During the day they were friends. They talked about important ideas, and she told him stories of the Indians of the Amazon, and about her education as a teacher in São Paulo. She listened when he talked about history and religion and evolution and all the theories and ideas that danced in his head. Even Mother never had time for that, always taking care of the younger kids or doing her endless jobs for the church. Anamari treated him like his ideas mattered.

But at night, when he dreamed, it was something else entirely. In those dreams he kept seeing her naked, and the voice kept calling her "Virgem America." What her virginity had to do with America he had no idea—even true dreams didn't always make sense—but he knew this much: when he dreamed of Anamari naked, she was always reaching out to him, and he was filled with such strong passions that more than once

he awoke from the dream to find himself throbbing with imaginary pleasure, like Onan in the Bible, Judah's son, who spilled his seed upon the ground and was struck dead for it.

Sam lay awake for a long time each time this happened, trembling, fearful. Not because he thought God would strike him down—he knew that if God hadn't struck his father dead for adultery, Sam was certainly in no danger because of an erotic dream. He was afraid because he knew that in these dreams he revealed himself to be exactly as lustful and evil as his father. He did not want to feel any sexual desire for Anamari. She was old and lean and tough, and he was afraid of her, but most of all Sam didn't want to desire her because he was not like his father, he would never have sexual intercourse with a woman who was not his wife.

Yet when he walked into the village of Agualinda, he felt eager to see her again, and when he found her—the village was small, it never took long—he could not erase from his mind the vivid memory of how she looked in the dreams, reaching out to him, her breasts loose and jostling, her slim hips rolling toward him—and he would bite his cheek for the pain of it, to distract him from desire.

It was because he was living with Father; the old bastard's goatishness was rubbing off on him, that's all. So he spent as little time with his father as possible, going home only to sleep at night.

The harder he worked at the jobs Anamari gave him to do, the easier it was to keep himself from remembering his dream of her kneeling over him, touching him, sliding along his body. Hoe the weeds out of the corn until your back is on fire with pain! Wash the Baniwa hunter's wound and replace the bandage! Sterilize the instruments in the alcohol! Above all, do not, even accidentally, let any part of your body brush against hers; pull away when she is near you, turn away so you don't feel her warm breath as she leans over your shoulder, start a bright conversation whenever there is a silence filled only with the sound of insects and the sight of a bead of sweat slowly etching its way from her neck down her chest to disappear between her breasts where she only tied her shirt instead of buttoning it.

How could she possibly be a virgin, after the way she acted in his dreams?

"Where do you think the dreams come from?" she asked.

He blushed, even though she could not have guessed what he was thinking. Could she?

"The dreams," she said. "Why do you think we have dreams that come true?"

It was nearly dark. "I have to get home," he said. She was holding his hand. When had she taken his hand like that, and why?

"I have the strangest dream," she said. "I dream of a huge snake, covered with bright green and red feathers."

"Not all the dreams come true," he said.

"I hope not," she answered. "Because this snake comes out of—I give birth to this snake."

"Quetzal," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"The feathered serpent god of the Aztecs. Or maybe the Mayas. Mexican, anyway. I have to go home."

"But what does it mean?"

"It's almost dark," he said.

"Stay and talk to me!" she demanded. "I have room, you can stay the night."

But Sam had to get back. Much as he hated staying with his father, he dared not spend a night in this place. Even her invitation aroused him. He would never last a night in the same house with her. The dream would be too strong for him. So he left her and headed back along the path through the jungle. All during the walk he couldn't get Anamari out of his mind. It was as if the plants were sending him the vision of her, so his desire was even stronger than when he was with her.

The leaves gradually turned from green to black in the seeping dark. The hot darkness did not frighten him; it seemed to invite him to step away from the path into the shadows, where he would find the moist relief, the cool release of all his tension. He stayed on the path, and hurried faster.

He came at last to the oilmen's town. The generator was loud, but the insects were louder, swarming around the huge area light, casting shadows of their demonic dance. He and his father shared a large one-room house on the far edge of the compound. The oil company provided much nicer hovels than the Brazilian government.

A few men called out to greet him. He waved, even answered once or twice, but hurried on. His groin felt so hot and tight with desire that he was sure that only the shadows and his quick stride kept everyone from seeing. It was maddening: the more he thought of trying to calm himself, the more visions of Anamari slipped in and out of his waking mind, almost to the point of hallucination. His body would not relax. He was almost running when he burst into the house.

Inside, Father was washing his dinner plate. He glanced up, but Sam was already past him. "I'll heat up your dinner."

Sam flopped down on his bed. "Not hungry."

"Why are you so late?" asked his father.

"We got to talking."

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"It's dangerous in the jungle at night. You think it's safe because nothing bad ever happens to you in the daytime, but it's dangerous."

"Sure, Dad. I know." Sam got up, turned his back to take off his pants. Maddeningly, he was still aroused; he didn't want his father to see.

But with the unerring instinct of prying parents, the old bastard must have sensed that Sam was hiding something. When Sam was buck naked, Father walked around and *looked*, just as if he never heard of privacy. Sam blushed in spite of himself. His father's eyes went small and hard. I hope I don't ever look like that, thought Sam. I hope my face doesn't get that ugly suspicious expression on it. I'd rather die than look like that.

"Well, put on your pajamas," Father said. "I don't want to look at that forever."

Sam pulled on his sleeping shorts.

"What's going on over there?" asked Father.

"Nothing," said Sam.

"You must do *something* all day."

"I told you, I help her. She runs a clinic, and she also tends a garden. She's got no electricity, so it takes a lot of work."

"I've done a lot of work in my time, Sam, but I don't come home like *that*."

"No, you always stopped and got it off with some whore along the way."

The old bastard whipped out his hand and slapped Sam across the face. It stung, and the surprise of it wrung tears from Sam before he had time to decide not to cry.

"I never slept with a whore in my life," said the old bastard.

"You only slept with one woman who wasn't," said Sam.

Father slapped him again, only this time Sam was ready, and he bore the slap stoically, almost without flinching.

"I had one affair," said Father.

"You got caught once," said Sam. "There were dozens of women."

Father laughed derisively. "What did you do, hire a detective? There was only the one."

But Sam knew better. He had dreamed these women for years. Laughing, lascivious women. It wasn't until he was twelve years old that he found out enough about sex to know what it all meant. By then he had long since learned that any dream he had more than once was true. So when he had a dream of Father with one of the laughing women, he woke up, holding the dream in his memory. He thought through it from beginning to end, remembering all the details he could. The name of the motel. The room number. It was midnight, but Father was in California, so it was an hour earlier. Sam got out of bed and walked quietly into the kitchen and dialed directory assistance. There was such a motel. He

wrote down the number. Then Mother was there, asking him what he was doing.

"This is the number of the Seaview Motor Inn," he said. "Call this number and ask for room twenty-one twelve and then ask for Dad."

Mother looked at him strangely, like she was about to scream or cry or hit him or throw up. "Your father is at the Hilton," she said.

But he just looked right back at her and said, "No matter who answers the phone, ask for Dad."

So she did. A woman answered, and Mom asked for Dad by name, and he was there. "I wonder how we can afford to pay for two motel rooms on the same night," Mom said coldly. "Or are you splitting the cost with your friend?" Then she hung up the phone and burst into tears.

She cried all night as she packed up everything the old bastard owned. By the time Dad got home two days later, all his things were in storage. Mom moved fast when she made up her mind. Dad found himself divorced and excommunicated all in the same week, not two months later.

Mother never asked Sam how he knew where Dad was that night. Never even hinted at wanting to know. Dad never asked him how Mom knew to call that number, either. An amazing lack of curiosity, Sam thought sometimes. Perhaps they just took it as fate. For a while it was secret, then it stopped being secret, and it didn't matter how the change happened. But one thing Sam knew for sure—the woman at the Seaview Motor Inn was not the first woman, and the Seaview was not the first motel. Dad had been an adulterer for years, and it was ridiculous for him to lie about it now.

But there was no point in arguing with him, especially when he was in the mood to slap Sam around.

"I don't like the idea of you spending so much time with an older woman," said Father.

"She's the closest thing to a doctor these people have. She needs my help and I'm going to keep helping her," said Sam.

"Don't talk to me like that, little boy."

"You don't know anything about this, so just mind your own business."

Another slap. "You're going to get tired of this before I do, Sammy."

"I love it when you slap me, Dad. It confirms my moral superiority."

Another slap, this time so hard that Sam stumbled under the blow, and he tasted blood inside his mouth. "How hard next time, Dad?" he said. "You going to knock me down? Kick me around a little? Show me who's boss?"

"You've been asking for a beating ever since we got here."

"I've been asking to be left alone."

"I know women, Sam. You have no business getting involved with an older woman like that."

"I help her wash a little girl who has bowel movements in bed, Father. I empty pails of vomit. I wash clothes and help patch leaking roofs and while I'm doing all these things we talk. Just talk. I don't imagine you have much experience with that, Dad. You probably never talk at all with the women *you* know, at least not after the price is set."

It was going to be the biggest slap of all, enough to knock him down, enough to bruise his face and black his eye. But the old bastard held it in. Didn't hit him. Just stood there, breathing hard, his face red, his eyes tight and piggish.

"You're not as pure as you think," the old bastard finally whispered. "You've got every desire you despise in me."

"I don't despise you for *desire*," said Sam.

"The guys on the crew have been talking about you and this Indian bitch, Sammy. You may not like it, but I'm your father and it's my job to warn you. These Indian women are easy, and they'll give you a disease."

"The guys on the crew," said Sam. "What do they know about Indian women? They're all fags or jerk-offs."

"I hope someday you say that where they can hear you, Sam. And I hope when it happens I'm not there to stop what they do to you."

"I would never *be* around men like that, Daddy, if the court hadn't given you shared custody. A no-fault divorce. What a joke."

More than anything else, those words stung the old bastard. Hurt him enough to shut him up. He walked out of the house and didn't come back until Sam was long since asleep.

Asleep and dreaming.

Anamari knew what was on Sam's mind, and to her surprise she found it vaguely flattering. She had never known the shy affection of a boy. When she was a teenager, she was the one Indian girl in the schools in São Paulo. Indians were so rare in the Europeanized parts of Brazil that she might have seemed exotic, but in those days she was still so frightened. The city was sterile, all concrete and harsh light, not at all like the deep soft meadows and woods of Xingu Park. Her tribe, the Kuikuru, were much more Europeanized than the jungle Indians—she had seen cars all her life, and spoke Portuguese before she went to school. But the city made her hungry for the land, the cobblestones hurt her feet, and these intense, competitive children made her afraid. Worst of all, true dreams stopped in the city. She hardly knew who she was, if she was not a true dreamer. So if any boy desired her then, she would not have known it. She would have rebuffed him inadvertently. And then the time for such things had passed. Until now.

"Last night I dreamed of a great bird, flying west, away from land.

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Only its right wing was twice as large as its left wing. It had great bleeding wounds along the edges of its wings, and the right wing was the sickest of all, rotting in the air, the feathers dropping off."

"Very pretty dream," said Sam. Then he translated, to keep in practice. "Que sonho lindo."

"Ah, but what does it mean?"

"What happened next?"

"I was riding on the bird. I was very small, and I held a small snake in my hands—"

"The feathered snake."

"Yes. And I turned it loose, and it went and ate up all the corruption, and the bird was clean. And that's all. You've got a bubble in that syringe. The idea is to inject medicine, not air. What does the dream mean?"

"What, you think I'm a Joseph? A Daniel?"

"How about a Sam?"

"Actually, your dream is easy. Piece of cake."

"What?"

"Piece of cake. Easy as pie. That's how the cookie crumbles. Man shall not live by bread alone. All I can think of are bakery sayings. I must be hungry."

"Tell me the dream or I'll poke this needle into your eye."

"That's what I like about you Indians. Always you have torture on your mind."

She planted her foot against him and knocked him off his stool onto the packed dirt floor. A beetle skittered away. Sam held up the syringe he had been working with; it was undamaged. He got up, set it aside. "The bird," he said, "is North and South America. Like wings, flying west. Only the right wing is bigger." He sketched out a rough map with his toe on the floor.

"That's the shape, maybe," she said. "It could be."

"And the corruption—show me where it was."

With her toe, she smeared the map here, there.

"It's obvious," said Sam.

"Yes," she said. "Once you think of it as a map. The corruption is all the Europeanized land. And the only healthy places are where the Indians still live."

"Indians or half-Indians," said Sam. "All your dreams are about the same thing, Anamari. Removing the Europeans from North and South America. Let's face it. You're an Indian chauvinist. You give birth to the resurrection god of the Aztecs, and then you send it out to destroy the Europeans."

"But why do I dream this?"

"Because you hate Europeans."

"No," she said. "That isn't true."

"Sure it is."

"I don't hate *you*."

"Because you know me. I'm not a European anymore, I'm a person. Obviously you've got to keep that from happening anymore, so you can keep your bigotry alive."

"You're making fun of me, Sam."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not. These are true dreams, Anamari. They tell you your destiny."

She giggled. "If I give birth to a feathered snake, I'll know the dream was true."

"To drive the Europeans out of America."

"No," she said. "I don't care what the dream says. I won't do that. Besides, what about the dream of the flowering weed?"

"Little weed in the garden, almost dead, and then you water it and it grows larger and larger and more beautiful—"

"And something else," she said. "At the very end of the dream, all the other flowers in the garden have changed. To be just like the flowering weed." She reached out and rested her hand on his arm. "Tell me *that* dream."

His arm became still, lifeless under her hand. "Black is beautiful," he said.

"What does *that* mean?"

"In America. The U.S., I mean. For the longest time, the blacks, the former slaves, they were ashamed to be black. The whiter you were, the more status you had—the more honor. But when they had their revolution in the sixties—"

"You don't remember the sixties, little boy."

"Heck, I barely remember the seventies. But I read books. One of the big changes, and it made a huge difference, was that slogan. Black is beautiful. The blacker the better. They said it over and over. Be proud of blackness, not ashamed of it. And in just a few years, they turned the whole status system upside down."

She nodded. "The weed came into flower."

"So. All through Latin America, Indians are very low status. If you want a Bolivian to pull a knife on you, just call him an Indian. Everybody who possibly can, pretends to be of pure Spanish blood. Pure-blooded Indians are slaughtered wherever there's the slightest excuse. Only in Mexico is it a little bit different."

"What you tell me from my dreams, Sam, this is no small job to do. I'm one middle-aged Indian woman, living in the jungle. I'm supposed to tell all the Indians of America to be proud? When they're the poorest of the poor and the lowest of the low?"

"When you give them a name, you create them. Benjamin Franklin did it, when he coined the name *American* for the people of the English colonies. They weren't New Yorkers or Virginians, they were Americans. Same thing for you. It isn't Latin Americans against Norteamericanos. It's Indians and Europeans. Somos todos indios. We're all Indians. Think that would work as a slogan?"

"Me. A revolutionary."

"Nós somos os americanos. Vai fora, Europa! America p'ra americanos! All kinds of slogans."

"I'd have to translate them into Spanish."

"Indios moram na India. Americanos moram na America. America nossa! No, better still: Nossa America! Nuestra America! It translates. Our America."

"You're a very fine slogan maker."

He shivered as she traced her finger along his shoulder and down the sensitive skin of his chest. She made a circle on his nipple and it shriveled and hardened, as if he were cold.

"Why are you silent now?" She laid her hand flat on his abdomen, just above his shorts, just below his navel. "You never tell me your own dreams," she said. "But I know what they are."

He blushed.

"See? Your skin tells me, even when your mouth says nothing. I have dreamed these dreams all my life, and they troubled me, all the time, but now you tell me what they mean, a white-skinned dream-teller, you tell me that I must go among the Indians and make them proud, make them strong, so that everyone with a drop of Indian blood will call himself an Indian, and Europeans will lie and claim native ancestors, until America is all Indian. You tell me that I will give birth to the new Quetzalcoatl, and he will unify and heal the land of its sickness. But what you never tell me is this: Who will be the father of my feathered snake?"

Abruptly he got up and walked stiffly away. To the door, keeping his back to her, so she couldn't see how alert his body was. But she knew.

"I'm fifteen," said Sam, finally.

"And I'm very old. The land is older. Twenty million years. What does it care of the quarter-century between us?"

"I should never have come to this place."

"You never had a choice," she said. "My people have always known the god of the land. Once there was a perfect balance in this place. All the people loved the land and tended it. Like the garden of Eden. And the land fed them. It gave them maize and bananas. They took only what they needed to eat, and they did not kill animals for sport or humans for hate. But then the Incas turned away from the land and worshipped gold


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and the bright golden sun. The Aztecs soaked the ground in the blood of their human sacrifices. The Pueblos cut down the forests of Utah and Arizona and turned them into red-rock deserts. The Iroquois tortured their enemies and filled the forests with their screams of agony. We found tobacco and coca and peyote and coffee and forgot the dreams the land gave us in our sleep. And so the land rejected us. The land called to Columbus and told him lies and seduced him and he never had a chance, did he? Never had a choice. The land brought the Europeans to punish us. Disease and slavery and warfare killed most of us, and the rest of us tried to pretend we were Europeans rather than endure any more of the punishment. The land was our jealous lover, and it hated us for a while."

"Some Catholic you are," said Sam. "I don't believe in your Indian gods."

"Say *Deus* or *Cristo* instead of *the land* and the story is the same," she said. "But now the Europeans are worse than we Indians ever were. The land is suffering from a thousand different poisons, and you threaten to kill all of life with your weapons of war. We Indians have been punished enough, and now it's our turn to have the land again. The land chose Columbus exactly five centuries ago. Now you and I dream our dreams, the way he dreamed."

"That's a good story," Sam said, still looking out the door. It sounded so close to what the old prophets in the Book of Mormon said would happen to America; close, but dangerously different. As if there were no hope for the Europeans anymore. As if their chance had already been lost, as if no repentance would be allowed. They would not be able to pass the land on to the next generation. Someone else would inherit. It made him sick at heart, to realize what the white man had lost, had thrown away, had torn up and destroyed.

"But what should I do with my story?" she asked. He could hear her coming closer, walking up behind him. He could almost feel her breath on his shoulder. "How can I fulfill it?"

By yourself. Or at least without me. "Tell it to the Indians. You can cross all these borders in a thousand different places, and you speak Portuguese and Spanish and Arawak and Carib, and you'll be able to tell your story in Quechua, too, no doubt, crossing back and forth between Brazil and Colombia and Bolivia and Peru and Venezuela, all close together here, until every Indian knows about you and calls you by the name you were given in my dream."

"Tell me my name."

"Virgem America. See? The land or god or whatever it is wants you to be a virgin."

She giggled. "Nossa senhora," she said. "Don't you see? I'm the new

Virgin *Mother*. It wants me to be a *mother*; all the old legends of the Holy Mother will transfer to me; they'll call me virgin no matter what the truth is. How the priests will hate me. How they'll try to kill my son. But he will live and become Quetzalcoatl, and he will restore America to the true Americans. That is the meaning of my dreams. My dreams and yours."

"Not me," he said. "Not for any dream or any god." He turned to face her. His fist was pressed against his groin, as if to crush out all rebellion there. "My body doesn't rule me," he said. "Nobody controls me but myself."

"That's very sick," she said cheerfully. "All because you hate your father. Forget that hate, and love me instead."

His face became a mask of anguish, and then he turned and fled.

He even thought of castrating himself, that's the kind of madness that drove him through the jungle. He could hear the bulldozers carving out the airstrip, the screams of falling timbers, the calls of birds and cries of animals displaced. It was the terror of the tortured land, and it maddened him even more as he ran between thick walls of green. The rig was sucking oil like heartblood from the forest floor. The ground was wan and trembling under his feet. And when he got home he was grateful to lift his feet off the ground and lie on his mattress, clutching his pillow, panting or perhaps sobbing from the exertion of his run.

He slept, soaking his pillow in afternoon sweat, and in his sleep the voice of the land came to him like whispered lullabies. I did not choose you, said the land. I cannot speak except to those who hear me, and because it is in your nature to hear and listen, I spoke to you and led you here to save me, save me, save me. Do you know the desert they will make of me? Encased in burning dust or layers of ice, either way I'll be dead. My whole purpose is to thrust life upward out of my soils, and feel the press of living feet, and hear the songs of birds and the low music of the animals, growling, lowing, chittering, whatever voice they choose. That's what I ask of you, the dance of life, just once to make the man whose mother will teach him to be Quetzalcoatl and save me, save me, save me.

He heard that whisper and he dreamed a dream. In his dream he got up and walked back to Agualinda, not along the path, but through the deep jungle itself. A longer way, but the leaves touched his face, the spiders climbed on him, the tree lizards tangled in his hair, the monkeys dunged him and pinched him and jabbered in his ear, the snakes entwined around his feet; he waded streams and fish caressed his naked ankles, and all the way they sang to him, songs that celebrants might sing at the wedding of a king. Somehow, in the way of dreams, he lost his clothing

without removing it, so that he emerged from the jungle naked, and walked through Agualinda as the sun was setting, all the Baniwas peering at him from their doorways, making clicking noises with their teeth.

He awoke in darkness. He heard his father breathing. He must have slept through the afternoon. What a dream, what a dream. He was exhausted.

He moved, thinking of getting up to use the toilet. Only then did he realize that he was not alone on the bed, and it was not his bed. She stirred and nestled against him, and he cried out in fear and anger.

It startled her awake. "What is it?" she asked.

"It was a dream," he insisted. "All a dream."

"Ah yes," she said, "it was. But last night, Sam, we dreamed the same dream." She giggled. "All night long."

In his sleep. It happened in his sleep. And it did not fade like common dreams, the memory was clear, pouring himself into her again and again, her fingers gripping him, her breath against his cheek, whispering the same thing, over and over: "Aceito, aceito-te, aceito." Not love, no, not when he came with the land controlling him, she did not love him, she merely accepted the burden he placed within her. Before tonight she had been a virgin, and so had he. Now she was even purer than before, Virgem America, but his purity was hopelessly, irredeemably gone, wasted, poured out into this old woman who had haunted his dreams. "I hate you," he said. "What you stole from me."

He got up, looking for his clothing, ashamed that she was watching him.

"No one can blame you," she said. "The land married us, gave us to each other. There's no sin in that."

"Yeah," he said.

"One time. Now I am whole. Now I can begin."

And now I'm finished.

"I didn't mean to rob you," she said. "I didn't know you were dreaming."

"I thought I was dreaming," he said, "but I loved the dream. I dreamed I was fornicating and it made me glad." He spoke the words with all the poison in his heart. "Where are my clothes?"

"You arrived without them," she said. "It was my first hint that you wanted me."

There was a moon outside. Not yet dawn. "I did what you wanted," he said. "Now can I go home?"

"Do what you want," she said. "I didn't plan this."

"I know. I wasn't talking to you." And when he spoke of home, he didn't mean the shack where his father would be snoring and the air would stink of beer.

"When you woke me, I was dreaming," she said.

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"I don't want to hear it."

"I have him now," she said, "a boy inside me. A lovely boy. But you will never see him in all your life, I think."

"Will you tell him? Who I am?"

She giggled. "Tell Quetzalcoatl that his father is a European? A man who blushes? A man who burns in the sun? No, I won't tell him. Unless someday he becomes cruel, and wants to punish the Europeans even after they are defeated. Then I will tell him that the first European he must punish is himself. Here, write your name. On this paper write your name, and give me your fingerprint, and write the date."

"I don't know what day it is."

"October twelfth," she said.

"It's August."

"Write October twelfth," she said. "I'm in the legend business now."

"August twenty-fourth," he murmured, but he wrote the date she asked for.

"The helicopter comes this morning," she said.

"Good-bye," he said. He started for the door.

Her hands caught at him, held his arm, pulled him back. She embraced him, this time not in a dream, cool bodies together in the doorway of the house. The geis was off him now, or else he was worn out; her body had no power over his anymore.

"I did love you," she murmured. "It was not just the god that brought you."

Suddenly he felt very young, even younger than fifteen, and he broke away from her and walked quickly away through the sleeping village. He did not try to retrace his wandering route through the jungle; he stayed on the moonlit path and soon was at his father's hut. The old bastard woke up as Sam came in.

"I knew it'd happen," Father said.

Sam rummaged for underwear and pulled it on.

"There's no man born who can keep his zipper up when a woman wants it." Father laughed. A laugh of malice and triumph. "You're no better than I am, boy."

Sam walked to where his father sat on the bed and imagined hitting him across the face. Once, twice, three times.

"Go ahead, boy, hit me. It won't make you a virgin again."

"I'm not like you," Sam whispered.

"No?" asked Father. "For you it's a sacrament or something? As my daddy used to say, it don't matter who squeezes the toothpaste, boy, it all squirts out the same."

"Then your daddy must have been as dumb a jackass as mine." Sam went back to the chest they shared, began packing his clothes and books

into one big suitcase. "I'm going out with the chopper today. Mom will wire me the money to come home from Manaus."

"She doesn't have to. I'll give you a check."

"I don't want your money. I just want my passport."

"It's in the top drawer." Father laughed again. "At least I always wore my clothes home."

In a few minutes Sam had finished packing. He picked up the bag, started for the door.

"Son," said Father, and because his voice was quiet, not derisive, Sam stopped and listened. "Son," he said, "once is once. It doesn't mean you're evil, it doesn't even mean you're weak. It just means you're human." He was breathing deeply. Sam hadn't heard him so emotional in a long time. "You aren't a thing like me, son," he said. "That should make you glad."

Years later Sam would think of all kinds of things he should have said. Forgiveness. Apology. Affection. Something. But he said nothing, just left and went out to the clearing and waited for the helicopter. Father didn't come to try to say good-bye. The chopper pilot came, unloaded, left the chopper to talk to some people. He must have talked to Father because when he came back he handed Sam a check. Plenty to fly home, and stay in good places during the layovers, and buy some new clothes that didn't have jungle stains on them. The check was the last thing Sam had from his father. Before he came home from that rig, the Venezuelans bought a hardy and virulent strain of syphilis on the black market, one that could be passed by casual contact, and released it in Guyana. Sam's father was one of the first million to die, so fast that he didn't even write.

Page, Arizona

The State of Deseret had only sixteen helicopters, all desperately needed for surveying, spraying, and medical emergencies. So Governor Sam Monson rarely risked them on government business. This time, though, he had no choice. He was only fifty-five, and in good shape, so maybe he could have made the climb down into Glen Canyon and back up the other side. But Carpenter wouldn't have made it, not in a wheelchair, and Carpenter had a right to be here. He had a right to see what the red-rock Navaho desert had become.

Deciduous forest, as far as the eye could see.

They stood on the bluff where the old town of Page had once been, before the dam was blown up. The Navahos hadn't tried to reforest here. It was their standard practice. They left all the old European towns unplanted, like pink scars in the green of the forest. Still, the Navahos weren't stupid. They had come to the last stronghold of European science, the University of Deseret at Zarahemla, to find out how to use the heavy rainfalls to give them something better than perpetual floods and erosion.

It was Carpenter who gave them the plan for these forests, just as it was Carpenter whose program had turned the old Utah deserts into the richest farmland in America. The Navahos filled their forests with bison, deer, and bears. The Mormons raised crops enough to feed five times their population. That was the European mindset, still in place: enough is never enough. Plant more, grow more, you'll need it tomorrow.

"They say he has two hundred thousand soldiers," said Carpenter's computer voice. Carpenter *could* speak, Sam had heard, but he never did. Preferred the synthesized voice. "They could all be right down there, and we'd never see them."

"They're much farther south and east. Strung out from Phoenix to Santa Fe, so they aren't too much of a burden on the Navahos."

"Do you think they'll buy supplies from us? Or send an army in to take them?"

"Neither," said Sam. "We'll give our surplus grain as a gift."

"He rules all of Latin America, and he needs *gifts* from a little remnant of the U.S. in the Rockies?"

"We'll give it as a gift, and be grateful if he takes it that way."

"How else might he take it?"

"As tribute. As taxes. As ransom. The land is his now, not ours."

"We made the desert live, Sam. That makes it ours."

"There they are."

They watched in silence as four horses walked slowly from the edge of the woods, out onto the open ground of an ancient gas station. They bore a litter between them, and were led by two—not Indians—Americans. Sam had schooled himself long ago to use the word *American* to refer only to what had once been known as Indians, and to call himself and his own people Europeans. But in his heart he had never forgiven them for stealing his identity, even though he remembered very clearly where and when that change began.

It took fifteen minutes for the horses to bring the litter to him, but Sam made no move to meet them, no sign that he was in a hurry. That was also the American way now, to take time, never to hurry, never to rush. Let the Europeans wear their watches. Americans told time by the sun and stars.

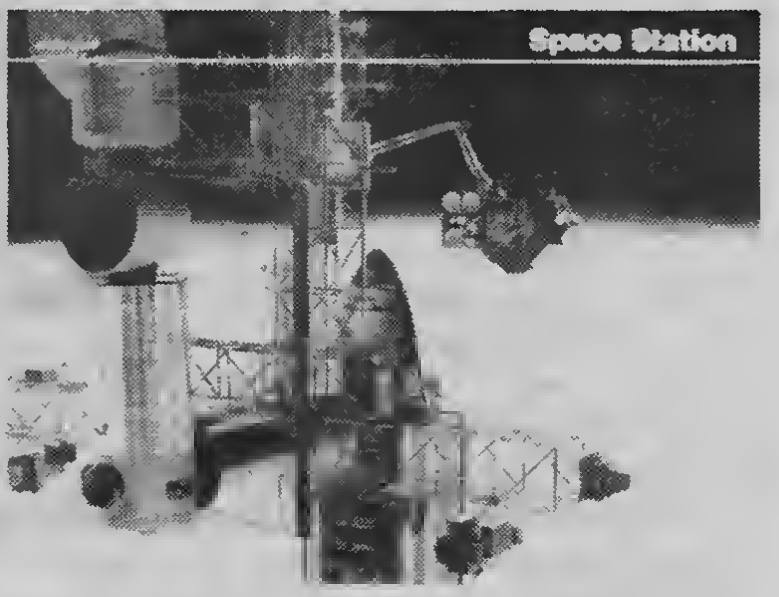
Finally the litter stopped, and the men opened the litter door and helped her out. She was smaller than before, and her face was tightly wrinkled, her hair steel-white.

She gave no sign that she knew him, though he said his name. The Americans introduced her as Nuestra Señora. Our Lady. Never speaking her most sacred name: Virgem America.

The negotiations were delicate but simple. Sam had authority to speak for Deseret, and she obviously had authority to speak for her son. The

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grain was refused as a gift, but accepted as taxes from a federated state. Deseret would be allowed to keep its own government, and the borders negotiated between the Navahos and the Mormons eleven years before were allowed to stand.

Sam went further. He praised Quetzalcoatl for coming to pacify the chaotic lands that had been ruined by the Europeans. He gave her maps that his scouts had prepared, showing strongholds of the prairie raiders, decommissioned nuclear missiles, and the few places where stable governments had been formed. He offered, and she accepted, a hundred experienced scouts to travel with Quetzalcoatl at Deseret's expense, and promised that when he chose the site of his North American capital, Deseret would provide architects and engineers and builders to teach his American workmen how to build the place themselves.

She was generous in return. She granted all citizens of Deseret conditional status as adopted Americans, and she promised that Quetzalcoatl's armies would stick to the roads through the northwest Texas panhandle, where the grasslands of the newest New Lands project were still so fragile that an army could destroy five years of labor just by marching through. Carpenter printed out two copies of the agreement in English and Spanish, and Sam and Virgem America signed both.

Only then, when their official work was done, did the old woman look up into Sam's eyes and smile. "Are you still a heretic, Sam?"

"No," he said. "I grew up. Are you still a virgin?"

She giggled, and even though it was an old lady's broken voice, he remembered the laughter he had heard so often in the village of Agualinda, and his heart ached for the boy he was then, and the girl she was. He remembered thinking then that forty-two was old.

"Yes, I'm still a virgin," she said. "God gave me my child. God sent me an angel, to put the child in my womb. I thought you would have heard the story by now."

"I heard it," he said.

She leaned closer to him, her voice a whisper. "Do you dream, these days?"

"Many dreams. But the only ones that come true are the ones I dream in daylight."

"Ah," she sighed. "My sleep is also silent."

She seemed distant, sad, distracted. Sam also; then, as if by conscious decision, he brightened, smiled, spoke cheerfully. "I have grandchildren now."

"And a wife you love," she said, reflecting his brightening mood. "I have grandchildren, too." Then she became wistful again. "But no husband. Just memories of an angel."

"Will I see Quetzalcoatl?"

"No," she said, very quickly. A decision she had long since made and would not reconsider. "It would not be good for you to meet face to face, or stand side by side. Quetzalcoatl also asks that in the next election, you refuse to be a candidate."

"Have I displeased him?" asked Sam.

"He asks this at my advice," she said. "It is better, now that his face will be seen in this land, that your face stay behind closed doors."

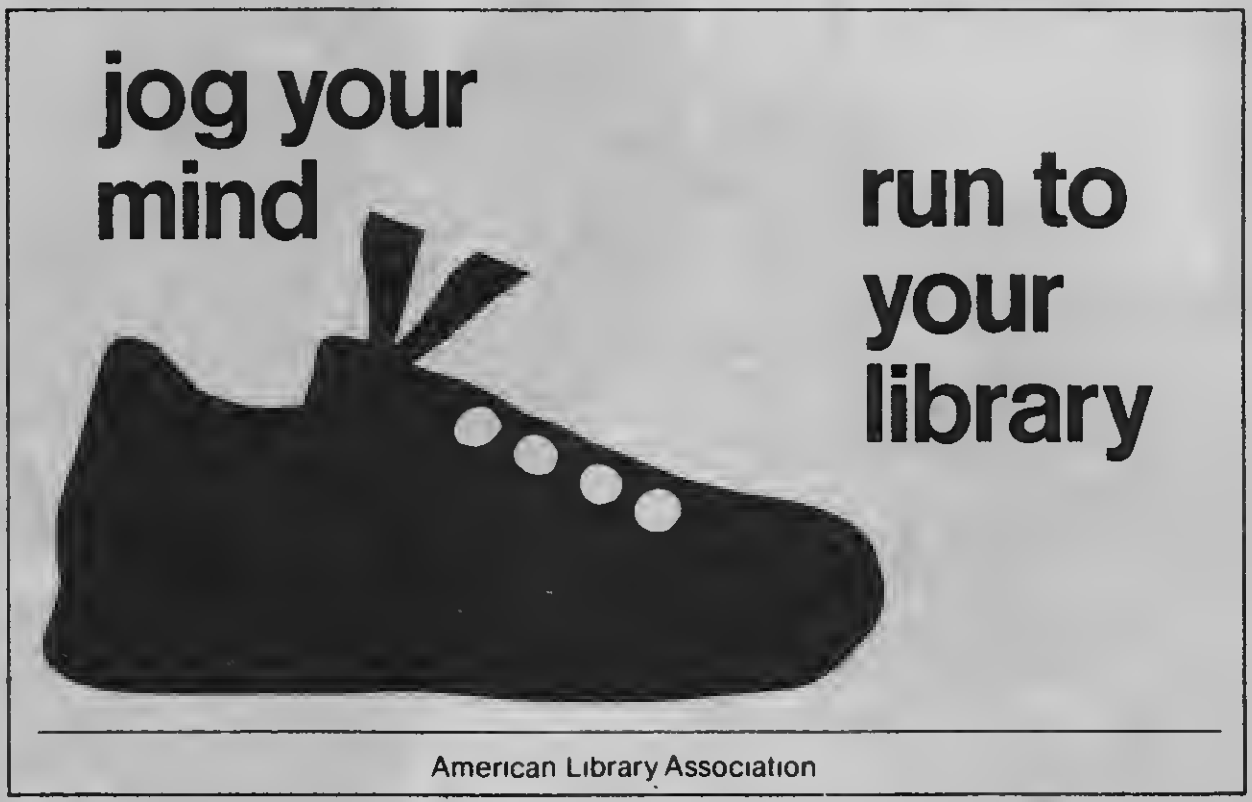
Sam nodded. "Tell me," he said. "Does he look like the angel?"

"He is as beautiful," she said. "But not as pure."

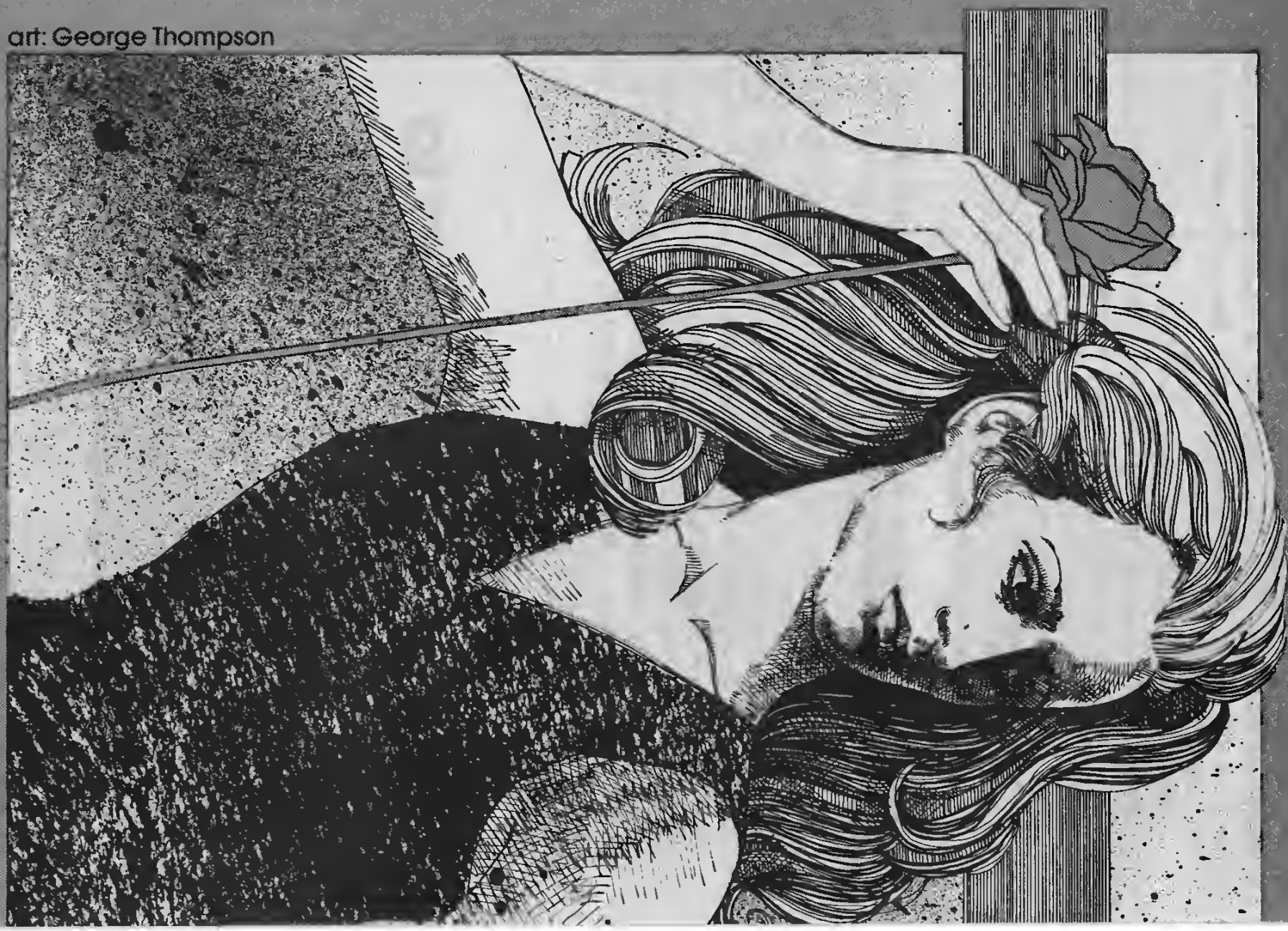
They embraced each other and wept. Only for a moment. Then her men lifted her back into her litter, and Sam returned with Carpenter to the helicopter. They never met again.

In retirement, I came to visit Sam, full of questions lingering from his meeting with Virgem America. "You knew each other," I insisted. "You had met before." He told me all this story then.

That was thirty years ago. She is dead now, he is dead, and I am old, my fingers slapping these keys with all the grace of wooden blocks. But I write this sitting in the shade of a tree on the brow of a hill, looking out across woodlands and orchards, fields and rivers and roads, where once the land was rock and grit and sagebrush. This is what America wanted, what it bent our lives to accomplish. Even if we took twisted roads and got lost or injured on the way, even if we came limping to this place, it is a good place, it is worth the journey, it is the promised, the promising land. ●



art: George Thompson





THE PEACE SPY

by Gene Wolfe

Gene Wolfe's *Free Live Free* was chosen by the New York *Times* as one of the hundred best books of 1985. (Tor Books recently issued it in paperback.) His latest novel, *Soldier of the Mist,* appeared in September from Tor Books.

"Hello, Mr. Percival," the young woman said, "so nice of you to come." She shut the door again, and Krasilnikov heard the rattle of a security chain before she opened it wide.

He stepped inside, and she closed the door behind him, threw the bolt and reattached the chain. "This is my business," he said. "I've gone to see people in places a lot farther from Washington than Alexandria."

"Won't you sit down?" She made a graceful gesture, and Krasilnikov reflected that she had not yet forgotten her manners; she was not yet so Americanized as all that.

He sat. "I admire your taste, Ms. Aralov." He smiled as he patted the arm of the stiff, tapestry-covered chair. "This is good antique furniture."

She shook her head. "It is Russian. No, it is not Russian, but it is as near to Russian furniture as I could discover here. I wished to say to the Americans, not 'I am an American,' but 'Look, I am a Soviet citizen living with you.' Surely you have seen such furnishings in other apartments. Would you care for tea?"

Krasilnikov nodded. "Sure, I've seen furniture of the same type, but it wasn't as nice as this—the red and gray color scheme. Most Russians go for red and black."

She smiled again, bitterly this time, before she bent in front of the steaming samovar in the corner. "Red for our country, black for death. We are so dramatic. Only I say red for our country, gray for no peace and no war. I say that because I like red and gray better." She presented him with a fragrant glass of tea.

He sipped. "You've got to understand, Ms. Aralov, that I don't do all my business with people like you. A lot of it's with Americans and American companies. The next biggest is with foreigners who want American citizenship."

"But you have handled such cases as mine before?"

"Sure," Krasilnikov said. He rattled off names, making some of them up.

"Ah, I know Lebedev, he was one of the early ones, one of the first of us."

"That's right."

"The others, they did not live here, not in Washington? Because I know all those in Washington, I think."

Krasilnikov reflected that her knowledge was not as complete as she believed. "No," he said. "Denikin was in New York, Nina Mikhalevo down in Florida."

"And you are not an attorney." She was looking at his card again, and he traced the raised black letters in his mind as she followed them with her remarkable gray eyes. The card read, *C. C. Percival,* and on the next

line, *Expediter*, followed by an address and a telephone number. He was proud of that card.

"No," he told her. "A lawyer would bring suit in District Court, and the Federal Government would stall it as long as they could. The Government can stall things for a long, long time here, Ms. Aralov."

"In my country, too. Here, how long?"

He shrugged. "Maybe five years, if you were lucky and had a good lawyer."

"And with you? How long?"

"Five weeks, if we're lucky. Five months if we're not."

For the first time, she too sat, perching on the edge of her high-backed divan. "Then with you is better."

Krasilnikov smiled. "I like to think so."

"And your fees?"

He knew how much she had in the bank, and he told her. After a moment he added, "That's the retainer. I keep it all, no matter how fast I get you back to Russia. If things don't move that fast, then you've hired me, at three hundred a week, until the retainer's used up or I've got you home. Of course you realize I won't be working for you exclusively, only as needed. I have other clients."

She nodded slowly. "The retainer. It is so much."

He was firm. "Frankly, I'm giving you a break, Ms. Aralov, because I like you and I like what you've done. If you were some fat Arab who needed an American passport, it would be a lot more."

"I have to live while you work. I will have to buy my ticket."

Indeed. Indeed. "Your father's the Minister of Marine?"

She nodded again. "You would say the Secretary of the Navy here."

"I know. Surely you can call on him for help."

"Once, yes. Not any more. I—"

He cut her off. "First the retainer, Ms. Aralov. Then we'll talk about your father. Maybe I can do something."

"I understand." She stood, smoothing the soft, gray-blue fabric of her skirt. "I must get my checkbook. If you will excuse me."

"Sure."

He wanted to search for the American listening devices he knew must be there, but he was too well trained for that. He took some papers from the breast pocket of his jacket instead; when she returned, he appeared to be studying them.

"Here is your retainer," she said. "It is nearly all I have."

He said thank you, crossing his legs, refolding his papers and replacing them before he accepted her check. "Now sit down and tell me about your father, Ms. Aralov."

She sat, this time on the footstool. "It was so strange, so terrible . . ."

Her eyes had filled with tears, and he felt something he had thought dead since childhood move inside him. He said, "Perhaps it isn't really as strange as you think, Ms. Aralov. Or as terrible. Start at the beginning."

She nodded and blew her nose in one of the tiny handkerchiefs women used here. "It started with that dancer . . ."

She was groping for the dancer's name. He supplied, "The President's son."

"Yes. He went to Moscow on a tourist visa, remember? And he said he would stay there until his father was no longer President, that he would be our security against nuclear attack. It was just after our Party Secretary had said *we* would never fire the first missile."

"And then others came."

She added, no longer sniffling. "Janet Johnson was one of them. I met her in Moscow. Her father is something in the cabinet here."

He sipped his tea and waited.

"Then we thought we should do the same thing, and we did." She threw back her hair, her eyes gleaming, and he thrilled as if to the call of a trumpet. "Oh, they tried to stop us, but they could not send us to the *gulag*—to the camps. Our fathers were in the Politburo, and we said we would go to the American embassy. Then they had to let us go, and they did."

He said, "But now you want to go back."

"Yes, there is the fighting in the east." She hesitated. "I could do something. With training I might become a nurse. Our grandmothers fought the Germans beside their men. I would even do that."

He waited, staring out the window at the bland, blank brick face of the apartment building across the street.

"And I am so lonely here."

Tonelessly he said, "There are other Russians around Washington."

"Not enough, and they are going back too, or trying to." After a moment she added, "I want to see my mother and father, my brother and my sister and my aunt. Can't you understand?"

"It seems that your father doesn't want to see you."

"He was so angry! The letters I got from him were terrible! Yet he sent money, so I would not be in need. Then just when I had decided to come back . . ."

"The money stopped."

"Yes! I wrote to him. I said, 'I am coming home, Little Father, please forgive me.' There was nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No more letters, no more money."

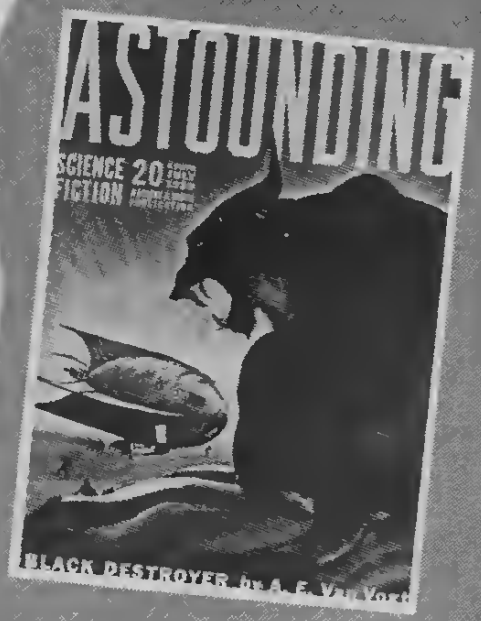
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His hand touched hers. "Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps your father doesn't really want you to return to Russia?"

For a moment she stared at him. "It was *before* I had told him I was coming home. He had ordered me a hundred times, called me traitor, the vilest names."

Carefully Krasilnikov said, "His position in your government would force him to do that, wouldn't it? How do you know he's not secretly proud of you?"

"But this was before! Before I had told him I wanted to come home."

"He might have guessed it just the same, from the tone of your letters. Or like I said, there are a lot of Russians around Washington. Couldn't one of them have tipped him off?"

She sighed, her eyes on the carpet. "You do not understand how it is in our country, how it is in our families."

He should have been proud, and he told himself to be proud; but the thing that had awakened was weeping in his chest. "I guess I don't," he told her. "But it seems to me that if you were proud of yourselves when you did what you did, your father might be proud of you, even if he couldn't say it out loud. I know we were all proud of the President's son, and the ones who went after him too."

She shook her head, eyes still averted.

He said, "If you want your check back, you can have it. Or I'll tear it up, if you want me to."

She looked up at that. "You aren't really an evil man, are you, Mr. Percival? I had hoped to employ an evil man, because I thought an evil man might get me what I wanted."

He smiled. "Evil enough, if you still want it. And call me Charlie, Ms. Aralov. If you still want to go back home, we'll be seeing a lot of each other." That was perfectly true, and ridiculous though it was, knowing it was true made him feel better.

"All right, Charlie. I am Sonja. Yes, I am going home."

"You don't have a passport?"

She shook her head. "We burned them when we arrived; that was part of our pledge that we would stay. You will say it was so foolish, and you will be right."

He shook his head. "I never fret over the past, Sonja. It uses up too much energy."

"But my real troubles are not with our government, but with the government here. They do not wish me to go. They have put every possible obstacle in my path. There is the court order—" She told him about it, swiftly and inaccurately.

When she was through he said, "All right, the first thing is to get you a Green Card."

"A Green Card?"

"So you can work here. You said you didn't have much money, Sonja, and your father won't send you any more. You're going to have to eat while I'm getting you out."

She shook her head. "No."

"And pay the rent on this apartment and maybe some legal fees. If I'm going to help you, you'll have to do what I say, or it's no use."

She rose from the footstool, angry and imperious. "What could I do here? Do you wish me to wait on tables?"

"That's a beautiful dress."

A breath and she was relaxed and smiling. "Oh, do you like it? I think I have some taste in clothes. Most of our women do not; they are *muzhiks*, peasants."

He said, "I want you to change it. The people who give out Green Cards don't like pretty dresses. Put on the dress you wear when you clean the kitchen."

"I have told you—"

"Have you thought of modeling, Sonja?" He saw at once that she had not. "You're tall, and with that face and that accent . . ." He let it hang. "I know a woman who runs an agency here. You might have to lose ten pounds or so."

"You think that?" At once her attention was on her body, her hands caressing her waist, lingering at her hips.

"Not for a man, Sonja. But for a modeling agency, maybe. We'll let Madame Deppe decide."

"Not in the clothes in which I clean my oven!"

"You'll have plenty of time to change and bathe before we see Madame," he explained patiently. "But it's no use seeing her without the Green Card."

She hesitated, though he knew he had won. At last, "All right. It will not harm to try. You will wait while I change?"

"Of course," Krasilnikov said.

When she was gone, he rose and went to the window. It was hot out; he remembered how the heat had struck his face when he had stepped from his car. There was so much good climate in this country, yet they had built their capital here.

The telephone rang. She called from the bedroom, "Would you get that, please? It is probably a mistake—a wrong number."

He said, "All right," and picked up the telephone. "Sonja Aralov's apartment."

"It is me, Wilson. And you are?"

"C. C. Percival."

"They are sending Ipatiev."

"The film star?"

"Yes. I can hardly believe it, but that is what they say. He will hold her."

Half to himself he whispered, "Unless he goes to Hollywood."

"You said? I could not hear you."

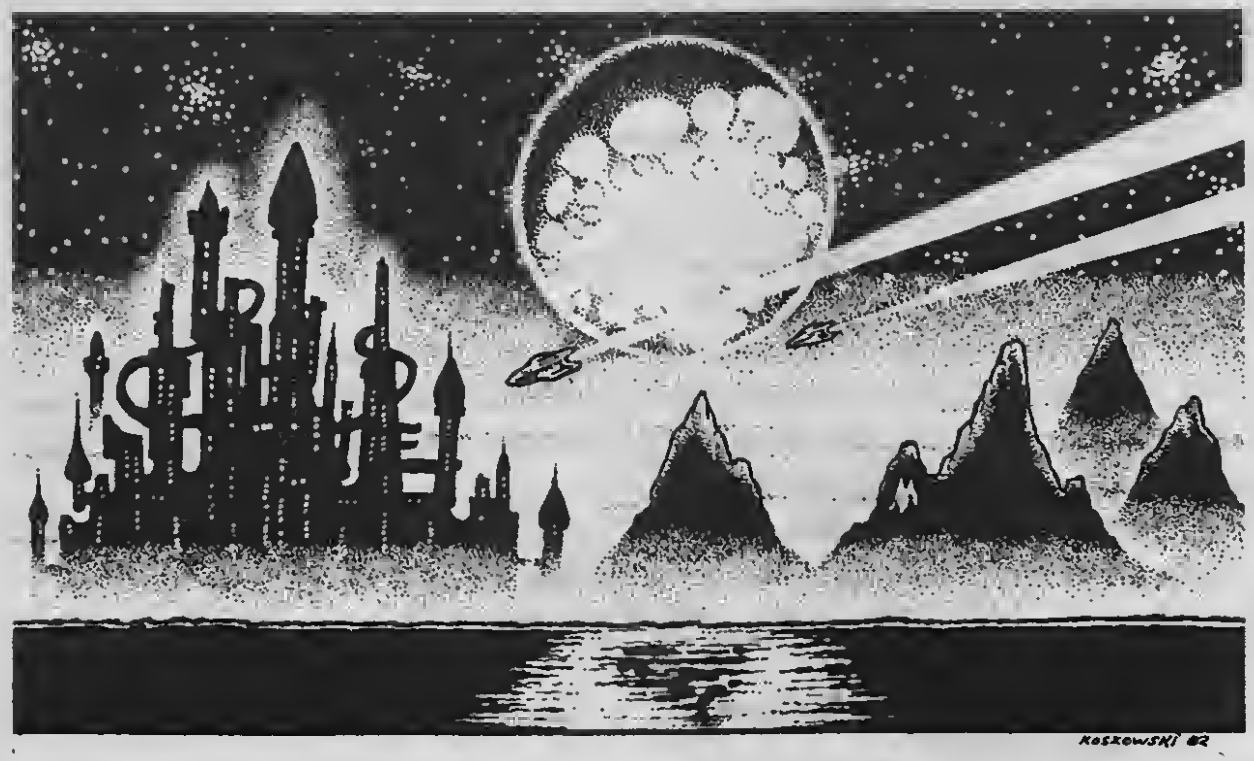
She called, "Was it not a wrong number?"

He covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "It was for me. I let my secretary know I'd be here." He told the mouthpiece, "Thank you," and hung up.

"I am not too long?"

"No hurry." There was a copy of *Time* on the shelf under the little table beside the samovar. He thought, Why do all of us subscribe to it? They could trace every agent just from that—from *Time*'s subscription list. Of course, we want them to know; agents count for something too. Not much, perhaps, but something.

He picked it up. The Chinese were in Kazakhstan, the Red Army had been stopped before Paris. It was still better than the old days, he decided. Better than when we were all so afraid, though at least we had peace. ●



THE CHANGELING UNCOVERED

You have changed the art
and painted the walls,
you have moved the desk
too often, until the limits
of this house have shifted
perspective clockwise
into another dimension.

It is 3 A.M. and the books
on your shelves face backwards,
titles hugging the wood,
the pages reverse negatives
of their former selves,
ghost letters, unreadable,
on a ground of night.

And the candles,
in elaborate candelabra
mounted on oak chifforobes
and handcarved armoires,
continue to gutter,
no matter how many times
you snuff them out.

The smoke hangs yellow,
not a slip of air moves,
yet outside the wind
is a holier-than-thou terror,
a mad headline scream
in which flesh is wasted.

In the back bedroom
you find a strange animal
trapped and thrashing
beneath the covers.
Its hooves are cloven,
sharp as a barber's dawn.

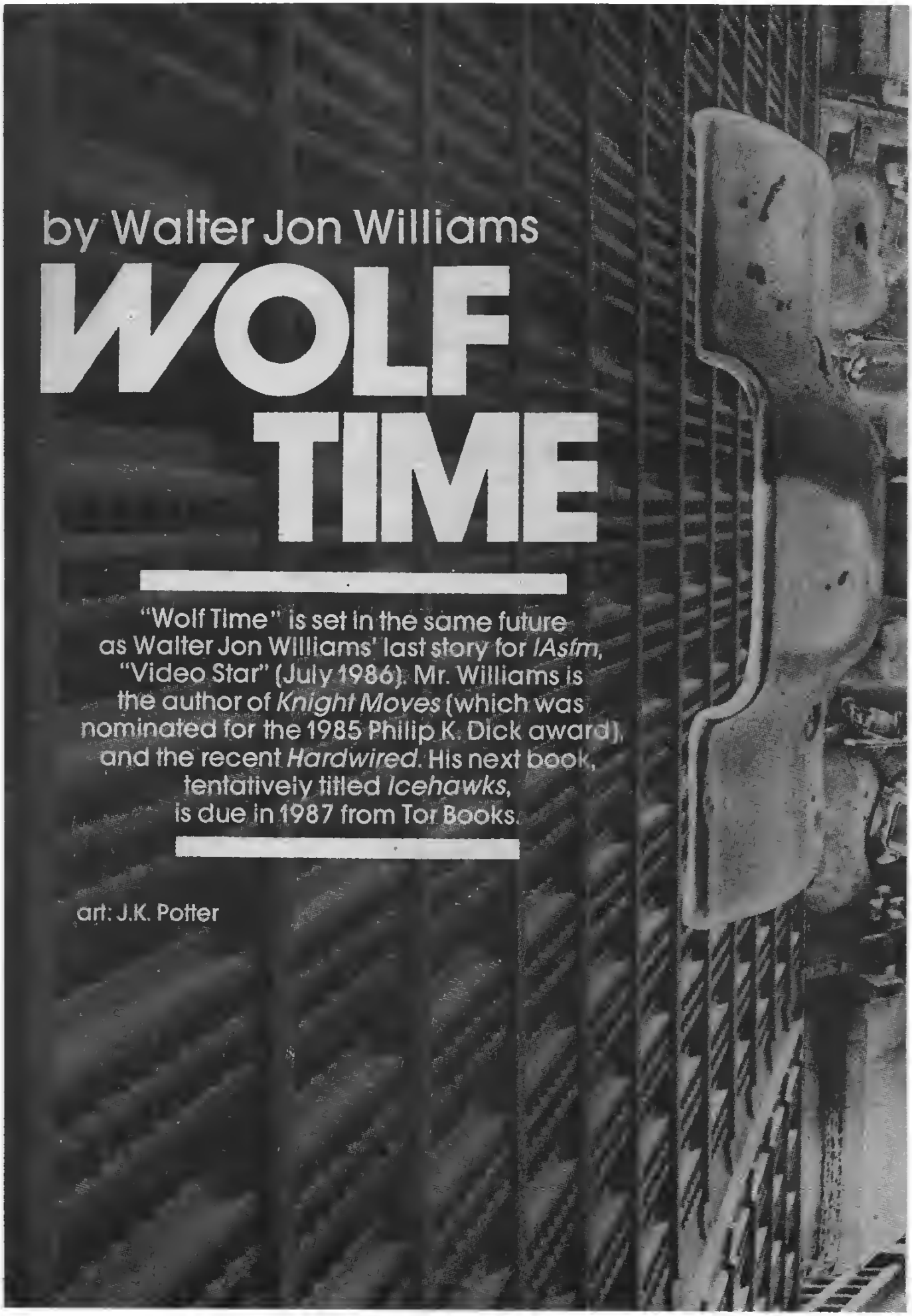
—Bruce Boston

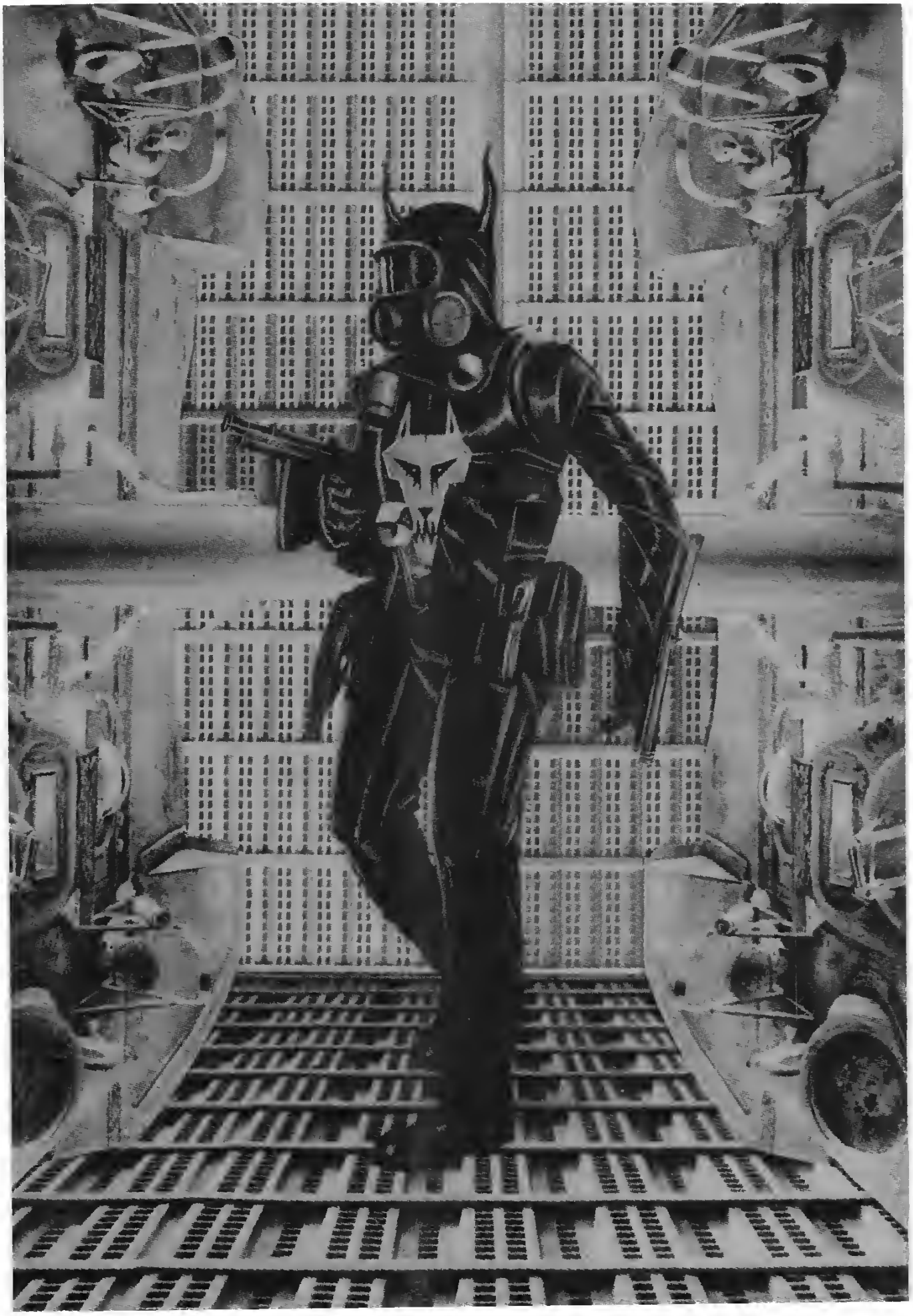
by Walter Jon Williams

WOLF TIME

"Wolf Time" is set in the same future as Walter Jon Williams' last story for *IAsfm*, "Video Star" (July 1986). Mr. Williams is the author of *Knight Moves* (which was nominated for the 1985 Philip K. Dick award), and the recent *Hardwired*. His next book, tentatively titled *Icehawks*, is due in 1987 from Tor Books.

art: J.K. Potter





Speakers in the hospital ceiling chimed a series of low, whispery, synthesized tones, tones that were scientifically proven to be relaxing. Reese looked down at the kid in the hospital bed and felt her insides twist.

The kid was named Steward, and he'd just had a bullet removed that morning. In the last few days, mad with warrior zen and a suicidal concept of personal honor, he'd gone kamikaze and blown up the whole network. Griffith was dead, Jordan was dead, Spassky was dead, and nobody had stopped Steward until everything in L.A. had collapsed entirely. He hadn't talked yet to the heat, but he would. Reese reached for her gun. Her insides were still twisting.

Steward had been lied to and jacked over and manipulated without his knowing it. Mostly it had been his friend Reese who had done it to him. She couldn't blame him for exploding when he finally figured out what had happened.

And now this.

Reese turned off the IV monitor so it wouldn't bleep when he died, and then Steward opened his eyes. She could see the recognition in his look, the knowledge of what was about to happen. She might have known he wouldn't make it easy.

"Sorry," she said, and raised the gun. What the hell else could she say? *Maybe we can still be friends, after this is over?*

Steward was trying to say something. She felt herself wring out again.

She shot him three times with her silenced pistol and left. The police guards didn't look twice at her hospital coat and ID. Proper credentials had always been her specialty.

CYA. Reese headed for Japan under a backup identity. Credentials her strong suit, as always. On the shuttle she drank a star beast and plugged her seat's interface stud into the socket at the base of her skull. She closed her eyes and silently projected the latest scansheets onto the optical centers of her brain, and her lips twisted in anger as for the first time she found out what had really gone down, what she'd been a part of.

Alien pharmaceuticals, tonnes of them, shipped down under illegal cover. The network had been huge, bigger than Reese, from her limited perspective, had ever suspected, and now the L.A. heat had *everything*. Police and security people everywhere, even in the space habitats, were going berserk.

All along, she'd thought it was friends helping friends, but her friends had jacked her around the same way she'd jacked around Steward. The whole trip to L.A. had been pointless—they had been stupid to send her. Killing Steward couldn't stop what was happening, it was all too big. The only way Reese could stay clear was to hide.

She ordered another drink, needing it badly. The shuttle speakers moaned with the same tuneless synthesized chords as had the speakers in the hospital room. The memory of Steward lying in the bed floated in her mind, tangled in her insides.

She leaned back against the headrest and watched the shuttle's wings gather fire.

Her career as a kick boxer ended with a spin kick breaking her nose, and Reese said the fuck with it and went back to light sparring and kung fu. Beating the hell out of herself in training only to have the hell beaten out of her in the ring was not her idea of the good life. She was thirty-six now and she might as well admit there were sports she shouldn't indulge in, even if she had the threadware for them. The realization didn't improve her mood.

Through the window of her condeco apartment, Reese could see a cold wailing northeast wind drive flying white scud across the shallow Aral Sea, its shriek drowning the minarets' amplified call to prayer. Neither the wind nor the view had changed in months. Reese looked at the grey Uzbek spring, turned on her vid, and contemplated her sixth month of exile.

Her hair was black now, shorter than she'd worn it in a long time. Her fingerprints were altered, as was the bone structure of her face. The serial numbers on her artificial eyes had been changed. However bleak its weather, Uzbekistan was good at that sort of thing.

The last person she'd known who had lived here was Steward. Just before he came to L.A. and blew everything to smithereens.

A young man on the vid was putting himself into some kind of combat suit, stuffing weapons and ammunition into pockets. He picked up a shotgun. Suspenseful music hammered from the speakers. Reese turned up the sound and sat down in front of the vid.

She had considered getting back into the trade, but it was too early. The scansheets and broadcasts were still full of stories about aliens, alien ways, alien imports. About "restructuring" going on in the policorps who dealt with the Powers. It was strange seeing the news on the vid, with people ducking for cover, refusing statements, the news item followed by a slick ad for alien pharmaceuticals. People were going to trial—at least those who survived were. A lot were cooperating. Things were still too hot.

Fortunately money wasn't a problem. She had enough to last a long time, possibly even forever.

Gunfire sounded from the vid. The young man was in a shootout with aliens, splattering Powers with his shotgun. Reese felt her nerves turn to ice.

The young man, she realized, was supposed to be Steward. She jumped forward and snapped off the vid. She felt sickened.

Steward had never shot an alien in his life. Reese ought to know.

Fucking assholes. Fucking media vermin.

She reached for her quilted Chinese jacket and headed for the door. The room was too damn small.

She swung the door open with a bang, and a dark-complected man jumped a foot at the sound. He turned and gave a nervous grin.

"You startled me."

He had an anonymous accent that conveyed no particular origin, just the abstract idea of foreignness. He looked about thirty. He was wearing suede pumps that had tabs of velcro on the bottoms and sides for holding onto surfaces in zero gee. His hands were jammed into a grey, unlined plastic jacket with a half-dozen pockets all sealed by velcro tabs. Reese suspected one of his hands of having a weapon in it. He was shivering from cold or nervousness. Reese figured he had just come down the gravity well—he was wearing too much velcro to have bought his clothes on Earth.

Some descendants of the Golden Horde, dressed in Flieger styles imported from Berlin, roared by on skateboards, the earpieces of their leather flying helmets flapping in the wind.

"Been in town long?" Reese asked.

He told her his name was Sardar Chandrasekhar Vivekenanda and that he was a revolutionary from Prince Station. His friends called him Ken. Two nights after their first meeting, she met him in the Natural Life bar, a place on the top story of a large bank. It catered to exiles and featured a lot of mahogany imported at great cost from Central America.

Reese had checked on Ken—no sense in being foolish—and discovered he was who he claimed to be. The scansheets from Prince mentioned him frequently. Even his political allies were denouncing his actions.

"Ram was trying to blame the February Riots on us," Ken told her. "Cheney decided I should disappear—the riots would be blamed on me, and Cheney could go on working."

Reese sipped her mataglap star, feeling it burn its way down her throat as she glanced down through the glass wall, seeing the wind scour dust over the Uzbeks' metal roofs and receiver dishes. She grinned. "So Cheney arranged for you to take the fall instead of him," she said. "Sounds like a friend of humanity to me, all right."

Ken's voice was annoyed. "Cheney knows what he's doing."

"Sure he does. He's setting up his friends. The question is, do you know what *you're* doing?"

Ken's fine-boned hands made a dismissive gesture. "From here I can




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make propaganda. Cheney sends me an allowance. I've bought a very good communications system."

She turned to him. "You going to need any soldiers in this revolution of yours?"

He shook his head. His lashes were full and black. "I think not. Prince Station is a hundred years old—it's in orbit around Luna, with ready access to minerals, but it cannot compete effectively with the new equipment on other stations. Ram wants to hang on as long as possible—his policy is to loot the economy rather than rebuild. He's guaranteed the loyalty of the stockholders by paying large dividends, but the economy can't support the dividends anymore, and the riots showed he has lost control over the situation. It is a matter of time only. We do not expect the change will be violent—not a military sort of violence, anyway."

"Too bad. I could use a job in someone's foreign legion about now." She glanced up as a group of people entered the bar—she recognized a famous swindler from Ceres named da Vega, his hands and face covered with expensive, glowing implant jewelry that reminded her of fluorescent slime mold. He was with an all-female group of bodyguards who were supposed to stand between him and any Cerean snatch teams sent to bring him to justice. They were all tall and round-eyed—da Vega liked women that way. He'd tried to recruit Reese when they first met. The pay was generous, round-eyed women being rare here, but the sexual favors were supposed to be included.

One of *those* jobs, Reese thought. She was tempted to feed him his socks, bodyguards or not, but in the end told him she was used to a better class of employer.

Da Vega turned to her and smiled. Uzbekistan was suddenly far too small a place.

Reese finished her mataglap star and stood. "Let's go for a walk," she said.

"An architecture of liberation," Ken said. "That's what we're after. You should read Cheney's thoughts on the subject."

The night street filled with a welling tide of wind. Its alloy surface reflected bright holograms that marched up and down dark storefronts, advertising wares invisible behind dead glass. The wind howled in the latticework of radio receivers pointed at the sky, through a spiky forest of antennae. A minaret outlined by flashing red strobes speared a sky that glowed with yellow sodium light.

"Liberation," Reese said. "Right."

"Too many closed systems," Ken said. He shrugged into the collar of his new down jacket. "That's the problem with space habitats in general—they *strive* for closed ecological systems, and then try to close as

much of their economy as possible. There's not enough *access*. I'm a macroeconomist—I work with a lot of models, try to figure out how things are put together—and the most basic obstacle always seems to be the lack of access to data. We've got a solar system filled with corporate plutocracies, all competing with each other, none giving free access to anything they're trying to do. And they've got colonies in other solar systems, and *nothing* about those gets out that the policorps don't want us to know. The whole situation is far too unstable—it's impossible to predict what's going to happen because the data simply isn't available. Everything's constructed along the lines of the old Orbital Soviet—not even the people who *need* the information get the access they require.

"Prince Station's main business is processing minerals—that's okay and it's steady, but the prices fluctuate a lot as new mineral sources are exploited in the Belt and elsewhere, and it requires heavy capital investment to keep the equipment up to date. So for the sake of a stable station economy, it would be nice for Prince to develop another, steadier source of export. Biologicals, say, or custom-configured databases. Optics. Wetware. Export genetics. Anything. But it takes time and resources—five years' worth, say—to set something like that up, and there are other policorps who specialize in those areas. We could be duplicating another group's work, and never know it until suddenly a new product comes onto the market and wipes out our five years' investment. All this secrecy is making for unstable economies. Unstable economies make for unstable political situations—that's why whole policorps suddenly go belly-up."

"So you want the policorps to give away their trade secrets."

"I want to do away with the whole *concept* of trade secrets. Ideally, what I'd like to do is create a whole new architecture of data storage and retrieval. Something that's so good that everyone will have to use it to stay competitive, but something that by its very nature prohibits restriction of access."

Reese laughed. The sound echoed from the cold metal street. "You're dreaming."

He gave her a faint smile. "You're right, of course. I'd have to go back two hundred years, right to the beginning of artificial intelligence, and redesign everything from the start. Then maybe I'd have a chance." He shrugged. "Cheney and I have more practical plans, fortunately."

She looked at him. "You remind me of someone I used to know. He wanted to know the truth, just like you. Wanted *access*."

"Yes?"

The cold wind seemed to cut her to the bone. "He died," she said. "Somebody shot him in a hospital." Somehow, caught in the warm rush of memory, she had forgot that ending.

"A funny place to get shot."

She remembered Steward's last comprehending look, the final words that never came. The northeaster touched her flesh, chilled her heart. The lonely street where they walked suddenly seemed endless, not just a street but the Street, an endless alloy thoroughfare where Reese walked in chill isolation, moving between walls of neon that advertised phantom, unreal comforts . . . She shivered and took his hand.

Ken's voice was soft, almost drowned by wind. "Were you close?"

"Yes. No." She tossed her head. "I wanted to be a friend, but it would have been bad for business."

"I see."

She tasted bile on her tongue, gazing down the endless gleaming Street again, the dark people on it who touched briefly and then parted. Sometimes, she thought, she just needed reminding. She wondered what Steward's last words might have been.

A bare yellow bulb marked the door to Ken's apartment building. They entered, the yellow light streaming through the door to reveal the worn furniture, the bright new communications equipment. "Hey," Reese said, "it's Agitprop Central." She was glad to be out of the wind.

The room blinked to the distant red pulse of the minaret's air-hazard lights. Reese stopped Ken's hand on the light switch, stopped his mouth, every time he tried to talk, with her tongue. She really didn't care if he had someone special back on Prince, preferred this to happen in a certain restrained, ethical silence. Her nerves were wired for combat and she snapped them on, speeding her perceptions and making everything seem in slow motion, the way his hands moved on her, the susurrus of her own breath, the endless red beat of the strobe that sketched the outlines of his face in the warm darkness . . . She could hear the bluster of the northeaster outside, the way it knocked at the panes, shrieked around corners, flooded down the long and empty Street outside. Kept securely outside, at least for this slow-moving, comforting moment of exile.

A day later a maintenance seal blew out on Prince Station and killed sixteen people. Ken was pleased.

"We can do a lot with this," he said. "Demonstrate how the administration's cronies can't even do simple jobs right."

Reese stood by the window, looking out toward the distant brown horizon, tired of Ken's torn wallpaper and sagging furniture. In the distance, foreigners on Bactrian camels pretended they were carrying silk to Tashkent.

"Sabotage, do you think?" she asked, then corrected herself. "Sorry. *Destabilization* is the proper term, right?"

He sat crosslegged on his chair, watching the screen with an intent,

calculating frown. "It could have been us, yes. An effective little action, if it was."

"The people who got killed weren't volunteers, anyway. Not your people."

He grinned in a puzzled way. "No. Of course not."

Reese turned to look at him, folding her arms. "That's what scares me about you idealists. You shoot sixteen people into a vacuum, and it's all for human betterment and the triumph of the revolution, so everything's okay."

Ken squinted as he looked at her against the light. "I'm not sure it's different from what you do."

"I'm a soldier. You're an ideologue. The difference is that you decide who gets killed and where, and I'm the one that has to do it and face the consequences if you're wrong. If it weren't for people like you, I wouldn't be necessary."

"You think this difference somehow makes you less responsible?"

Reese shook her head. "No. But the people I fight—they're volunteers, same as me. Getting paid, same as me. It's clean, very direct. I take the money, do a job. I don't know what it's about often as not. I don't really *want* to know. If I asked, the people I work for would just lie anyway." She moved to the shabby plush chair and sat, curling one leg under her.

"I fought for humanity once, in the Artifact War. I was on Archangel with Far Jewel, making the planet safe for the Freconomicist cause. Making use of the alien technology we'd stumbled on by accident, all that biochem ware the Powers are so good at. It sounded like a noble adventure, but what we were doing was looting alien ruins and stealing from the other policorps. The war blew up, and next I knew I was below the surface in those alien tunnels, and I was facing extermination cyberdrones and tailored bugs with nothing between death and my skin but a very inadequately armored environment suit. And then I got killed."

Ken looked at her with his head cocked to one side, puzzled. "You had clone insurance? This is a different body?"

Anger burned in Reese as she spoke, and she felt it tempering her muscles, turning them rigid. Remembered dark tunnels, bodies piled in heaps, the smell of fear that burned itself into the fibers of her combat suit, the scent that no amount of maintenance and cleaning would ever ever remove.

"No. Nothing like that. *I* did the killing—I killed myself, my personality. Because everything I was, everything I'd learned, was just contributing to help my employers, my officers, and the enemy in their effort to murder me. I had to streamline myself, get rid of everything that didn't contribute in a positive way toward my own physical survival. I

became an animal, a tunnel rat. I saw how qualities like courage and loyalty were being used by our bosses to get us killed, and so I became a disloyal coward. My body was working against me—I'm too tall for tunnels—but I tried real hard to get short, and funny enough it seemed to work. Because in times like that, if you've got your head right, you can do what you have to."

She looked at Ken and grinned, baring her teeth. An adrenaline surge, triggered by the violent memory, prickled the down on her arms. "I'm still an animal. I'm still disloyal. I'm still a coward. Because that's the only way to keep alive."

"If you feel that way, you could get out of the business."

She shrugged. "It's what I do best. And if I did something else—got a job as a rigger, or some kind of tech—then I'd just be somebody else's animal, a cow maybe, being herded from one place to another and fed on grass. At least this way, I'm my own animal. I get my reward up front."

"And during?" Ken's dark eyes were intent.

Reese shifted in her seat, felt a certain discomfort. Nerves, she thought, jinking from the adrenaline. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"You like the work. I have that impression."

She laughed. No reason to be defensive about it. "I like being wired and hanging right on the edge. I like knowing that I have to do things right, that any mistake I make matters."

He shook his head. "I don't understand that. People like you."

"You haven't had to become an animal. You're a macroeconomist, and you're trained to take the long view. A few people blown out a hatch, that's just an acceptable sacrifice. I tend to take this kind of thing personally, is all. See, I figure everyone who ever tried to get me killed was looking at the long view."

Ken's gaze was steady. "I'm not planning on getting you killed. That's not part of my view."

"Maybe someday I'll end up standing between you and your revolution. Then we'll see."

He didn't say anything. In the steadiness of his dark eyes, the absence of expression, Reese read her answer, and knew it was the one she'd expected.

"Reese."

It was the first time she'd heard her name in six months, and now it came from a complete stranger on a streetcorner in Uzbekistan. Her hardwired nerves were triggered and her combat thread was evaluating the man's stance, calculating possible dangers and responses, before she even finished her turn.

He was about forty, tanned, with receding brown hair and a widow's peak. His stance was open, his hands in plain sight: he wore a blue down vest over a plaid shirt, baggy grey wool pants, old brown square-toed boots. He smiled in a friendly way. His build was delicate, as if he'd been genetically altered. His face was turning ruddy in the wind.

"You talking to me?" Reese asked him. "My name's Waldman." Her wetwear was still evaluating him, analyzing every shift in posture, movement of his hands. Had Ken shopped her? she wondered. Had Cheney, after deciding she was a danger to Ken?

His smile broadened. "I understand your caution, but we know who you are. Don't worry about it. We want to hire you."

His voice was as American as hers. Her speeded-up reflexes gave her plenty of time to contemplate his words.

"You'd better call me Waldman if you want to talk to me at all."

He put up his hands. Her nerves crackled. She noticed he had a ragged earlobe, as if someone had torn off an earring in a fight. "Okay, Miss Waldman. My name's Berger. Can we talk?"

"The Natural Life, in an hour. Do you know where that is?"

"I can find out. See you there."

He turned and walked casually up the narrow street. She watched till he was gone and then went to the apartment she rented in a waterfront condecology. She looked for signs anyone had been there in her absence—there weren't any, but that didn't mean anything—and then, to calm her jittery nerves, she cleaned her pistol and took a long, hot bath with the gun sitting on the side of the steel tub. She stretched out as far as the tub would let her, feeling droplets of sweat beading on her scalp while she watched the little bathroom liquid-crystal vidscreen show a bouncy pop-music program from Malaya. She changed her clothes, put the pistol back in its holster—the security softwear at the Natural Life would shred her with poisoned darts if she tried to carry it in—and then headed back into town. The muezzins' song hung in the gusty air. Her mind sifted possibilities.

Berger was the heat. Berger was an assassin. Da Vega had shopped her out of pique. Cheney had sold her name. Ken had regretted telling her so much about his revolution and decided to have her iced before she sold his plans to Ram.

Life was just so full of alternatives.

Berger hadn't arrived at the bar when she came in. The bartender was at prayer and so she turned on the desktop comp and read the scansheets, looking for something that might give her an edge, help her to understand what it was about.

Nothing. The aliens hadn't generated any headlines today. But there was a note about a Cerean exile named da Vega who had been found

dead, along with a couple of his bodyguards. Another bodyguard was missing.

Reese grinned. The Uzbeks, a people who usually endorsed the long view, had probably turned da Vega into fertilizer by now.

The amplified muezzins fell silent. The bartender returned and flipped on todo music broadcast by satellite from Japan. He took her order and then Berger walked in, dabbing at his nose with a tissue. He hadn't been ready, he explained, for this bitter a spring. He'd have to buy a warm jacket.

"Don't worry, Miss Waldman," he added. "I'm not here to crease you. If I wanted to do that, I could have done it on the street."

"I know. But you might be a cop trying to lure me out of Uzbekistan. So I hope to hell you can prove to me who you are."

He grinned, rubbed his forehead uncomfortably. "Well. To tell you the truth, I *am* a policeman, of a sort."

"Terrific. That really makes my day."

He showed her ID. She studied it while Berger went on. "I'm a captain in Brighter Suns' Pulsar Division. We'd like to hire you for a job up the well."

"Vesta?"

"No. Closer to Earth."

Reese frowned. Policorp Brighter Suns was one of the two policorps that had been set up to deal with the alien Powers. It was almost exclusively into Power imports, and its charter forbade it from owning territory outside of its home asteroid, Vesta. A lot of Brighter Suns execs were running for cover ever since Steward had blown Griffith's network in L.A., and the whole Vesta operation was being restructured.

"The Pulsar Division handles internal security on Vesta," Reese said. "Your outside intelligence division is called Group Seven. So why is Pulsar handling a matter so far away from home?"

"What we'd like you to handle *is* an internal security matter. Some of our people have gone rogue."

"You want me to bring them back?"

Something twitched the flesh by one of Berger's eyes. She knew what he was going to say before the words came out his mouth. She felt her nerves tingling, her muscles warming. It had been a long time.

"No. We want you to ice them."

"Don't tell me anything more," she said. "I'm going to check you out before I listen to another word."

"It's not even murder, I'd say," Berger said. He was eating spinach salad in an expensive restaurant called the Texas Beef, named after a vaguely pornographic and wildly popular vid show from Alice Springs.

Dressing spattered the creamy table cloth as Berger waved his fork. "We've got tissue samples and memory thread, like we do for all our top people—hell, we'll clone 'em."

"That doesn't mean I can't end up in prison for it."

"Who's gonna catch you? It's a goddam asteroid fifty zillion klicks from anywhere."

She had checked him out as far as she could. After telling him what she was going to do, she'd sent a message to Vesta asking for confirmation of the existence of one Captain Berger of the Pulsar Division, that and a photo. Both arrived within twelve hours. If this was a plot to arrest her, it had some unlikely elements.

Reese took a mouthful of lamb in mustard sauce. She worked out hard enough, she figured, and deserved her pleasures.

"The rock's about two kilometers in diameter. The official name is 2131YA, but it's also called Cuervo Gold."

"Funny names they're giving asteroids these days."

"They've run out of minor Greek gods, I guess. Cuervo's officially owned by a non-policorporate mining company called Exeter Associates, which in turn is owned by us. Gold's an Apollo asteroid, crossing Earth's orbit on a regular schedule, and that makes it convenient for purposes of resupply, and also makes it a lot more isolated than any of the rocks in the Belt. We've had a lab there for a while, using it to develop some technology that—" He grinned. "Well, that we wanted to keep far away from any competition. Security on Vesta is tight, but it's a port, people are always coming in and out. What we've got on the asteroid is pretty hot stuff, and we wanted to keep it away from the tourists."

"I don't really want to know," Reese said.

"I don't know myself, so I couldn't tell you," Berger said. "The work was in a fairly advanced stage when certain activities relating to your old friend Griffith became public. It became an urgent matter to shut down the project and transfer its members to other duties in central Africa, where I work. If the investigators found out about our owning that asteroid, and what's on it, Brighter Suns could be very embarrassed."

"The techs refused to move?" Reese asked.

"They protested. They said their work was entering a critical stage. A transport was sent from Earth to pick them up, but they refused to evacuate, and then we lost touch with the freighter. We think the crew have been killed or made prisoner."

"Your people could have defected to another policorp, using the transport."

"We don't think so. Their work would have been hard to take with them. And they couldn't have gone far without attracting attention—some of the lab personnel were Powers."

A coolness moved through Reese's bones. She sat up, regarding Berger carefully. Powers were forbidden off the two entry ports—the official reason was that there was too much danger of cross-contamination from alien life-forms. Plagues had already devastated the two Power legations, and the reverse was always a possibility. The discovery of Powers in Brighter Suns employ outside of Vesta would ruin Brighter Suns' credit for good.

But after a while the heat on Brighter Suns would die down. Trade with the aliens was too profitable for people to interfere with it for long. In a year or two, the lab could be reopened with cloned personnel and some very mean security goons to make certain they followed orders.

"I understand your sense of urgency," Reese said. "But why me? Why not go yourself?"

"We don't have anyone with your talents on Earth," Berger said. "I'm not wired the way you are. And . . . well, we'd like to know you're gainfully employed by us rather than floating around Uzbekistan waiting to be captured by the heat. If we can find you, they probably can."

Reese sipped her club soda. "How did you find me, exactly?"

"Someone recognized you."

"Who might that have been?"

The skin by Berger's eye gave a leap. "It's already taken care of," he said. "We didn't want him giving your name to anyone else."

Da Vega. Well. At least it wasn't Ken.

But there was also a threat: Berger didn't want her in this refugees' paradise, where the number of desperate people was higher than average and where a policorporate kidnap team could find her. If they'd already iced one person, they could put the ice on another.

"Let's talk payment," Reese said. "Brighter Suns, I think, can afford to pay me what I'm worth."

Ram's cops had beaten some woman to death during interrogation. Ken was busy at his console, putting out fact and opinion pieces, making the most of another death for the revolution. Reese paced the room, picking at the tattered wallpaper, eating Mongolian barbecue from a waxed paper container. Below the window, some drunken descendant of the Golden Horde was singing a sad song to the moon. He kept forgetting the lyrics and starting over, and the burbling ballad was getting on Reese's nerves.

"I'd feel better," she said, "if Cheney was paying you a decent wage."

"He pays what he can afford." Ken's fingers sped over his keyboard. "The money has to be laundered, and he has to be careful how he does it."

"You don't even have a promise of a job after it's all over."

Ken shrugged. "Prince can always use another economist."

"And you don't have protection. Ram could order you iced."

"He needs a live scapegoat, not a dead martyr." He frowned as he typed. "This isn't a mysterious business, you know. Ram knows our strength and most of our moves, and we know his. There aren't very many hidden pieces on the board."

The Uzbek began his song again. Reese clenched her teeth. She put her hand on Ken's shoulder.

"I'm disappearing tomorrow," she said.

He tilted his head back, looking up in surprise. His fingers stopped moving on the keys.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I got a job."

She saw a confirmation in his eyes. "Not one you can talk about," he said.

"No. But it's not for Ram. In case you were wondering."

He took her hand in one of his. "I'll miss you."

Reese put her food carton on top of his video display. Her chopsticks jabbed the air like rabbit ear antennae.

"I've got another twelve hours before I take the plane to Beijing."

Ken turned off his console. "I can send the rest out tomorrow," he said.

Reese was surprised. "What about the revolution?"

He shrugged and kissed the inside of her wrist. "Sometimes I feel redundant. The revolution is inevitable, after all."

"It's nice to know," Reese said, "that the devil can quote ideology to his purpose."

Outside, the Uzbek continued his wail to the desolate stars.

The tug was called *Voidrunner*, and it was thirty years old at least, the padding on its bulkheads patched with silver tape, bundles of cable hanging out of access hatches. Reese had been in enough ships like it not to let the mess bother her—all it meant was that the tug didn't have to impress its passengers. The air inside tasted acrid, as if the place was crammed full of sweating men, but there were only four people on board.

Berger introduced the other three to Reese, then left, waving cheerily over his shoulder. About four minutes later, *Voidrunner* cast off from Charter Station and began its long acceleration to its destination.

Reese watched the departure from the copilot's chair in the armored docking cockpit. The captain performed the maneuvers with his eyes closed, not even looking out the bubble canopy at the silver-bright floodlit skin of Charter, reality projected into his head through his interface thread, his eyelids twitching as his eyes reflexively scanned mental indicators.

His name was Falkland. He was about fifty, an Artifact War veteran who, fifteen years before, had been doing his level best to kill Reese in the tunnels of Archangel. A chemical attack had left his motor reflexes damaged, and he wore a light silver alloy exoskeleton. Fortunately his brain and interface thread had survived the war intact. He wore a grey beard and his hair long over his collar.

"Prepare for acceleration," he said, his eyes still closed. "We'll be at two gees for the first six hours."

Reese looked out at Earth's dull grey moon, vast, taking up most of the sky. "Right," she said. "Got my piss bottle right here." Hard gees were tough on the bladder.

After the long burn *Voidrunner* settled into a constant one-gee acceleration. Falkland stayed strapped in, his eyelids still moving to some internal REM light show. Reese unbuckled her harness, stretched her relieved muscles while her spine and neck popped, and moved downship.

Falkland offered no comment.

The crew compartment smelled of fresh paint. Reese saw the tug's engineer, a tiny man named Chung, working on a bulkhead fire alarm. His head was bobbing to music he was feeding to his aural nerves. Chung was so into the technophilic Destinarian movement he was turning himself slice by slice into a machine. His eyes were clear implants that showed the interior silver circuitry; his ears were replaced by featureless black boxes, and there were other boxes of obscure purpose jacked into his hairless scalp. His teeth were metal, and liquid crystal jewelry, powered by nerve circuitry, shone in ever-changing patterns on his cheeks and on the backs of his hands. He hadn't said anything when Berger introduced him, just looked at Reese for a moment, then turned back to his engines.

Now he said something. His voice was hoarse, as if he wasn't used to using it. "He's downship. In Cargo B."

His back was to Reese, and she had been moving quietly. His head still bobbed to inaudible music. He hadn't even turned his head to speak. "Thanks," she said. "Nice implants."

"The best. I built 'em myself."

"Aren't you supposed to be monitoring the burn?"

He pointed at one of his boxes. "I am."

"Nice."

She always found she had common ground with control freaks.

Vickers was in Cargo B, as Chung had promised. He was Reese's armorer, hired by Berger for the sole purpose of maintaining the combat suit that Reese was to wear on Cuervo. Vickers was young, about eighteen, and thin. His dark hair was cut short; he had a stammer and severe acne. He was dressed in oil-spattered coveralls. When Reese walked in,

Vickers was peeling the suit's components out of their foam packing. She helped him lay the suit on the deck. Vickers grinned.

"W-wolf 17," he said. His voice was American Southern. "My favorite. You're gonna kick some ass with this. It's so good it can p-practically do the job by itself."

The suit was black, long-armed, anthropoid. The helmet, horned by radio antennae, was fused seamlessly to the shoulders. Inside, Reese's arms, legs, and body would fit into a complex web that would hold her tightly: the suit would amplify and strengthen her every move. It wasn't entirely natural movement—she'd have to get used to having a lot more momentum in free fall than she normally did.

"F-fuckin' great machine," Vickers said. Reese didn't answer.

The Wolf's dark viewplate gleamed in the cool cabin light. There was a clean functionality to its design that made it even more fearful—nothing in its look gave the impression that it was anything but a tool for efficient murder. The white Wolf trademark shone on the matte-black body of the suit. Reese fought a memory charged with fear—Wolf made most of the cyberdrones she'd encountered on Archangel. The combat suit, free of its packing, had a smell she'd hoped she'd never scent again.

"I want to look at the manual," she said. "And the schematics." If her life was going to depend on this monster, she wanted to know everything there was to know about it.

He looked at her approvingly. "I've got them on thread in m-my cabin. The suit's standard, except for some c-custom thread woven into the t-target-acquisition unit. Berger knows who you're going to b-be gunning for, and he put in some specific target-identification routines. You're gonna be h-hot."

"That's the plan," Reese said. The smell of the Wolf, oil and plastic webbing and cold laminate armor, rose in her nostrils. She repressed a shiver.

Vickers was still admiring the Wolf. "One wicked son of a bitch," he said. When talking to machines, he lost his stammer.

Reese and the Wolf moved as one in the void. Amber-colored target-acquisition data glowed on the interior of the black faceplate. Below them the asteroid glittered as flecks of mica and nickel reflected the relentless sun.

No way they're not gonna know you're coming, Berger had told her. *Not with your ship's torch coming at them. We stabilized the rock's spin, so you can try landing on the blind side, but they're smart enough to have put detectors out there, so we can't count on surprise. What we're going to have to do is armor you so heavily that no matter what they try to do to you, they can't get through.*

Great, she thought. Now the rock's little techs, human and alien, were probably standing by the airlocks with whatever weapons they'd been able to assemble in the last weeks, just waiting for something to try booming in. All she could do was hope they weren't ready for the Wolf.

The hissing of her circulating air was very loud in the small space of the helmet. Reese could feel sweat gathering under the Wolf's padded harness. The rock's short horizon scrolled below her feet. Attitudinal jets made brief adjustments, keeping Reese close to the surface. The Wolf's suit monitors were projected, through her interface stud, in a complex multi-dimensional weave, bright columns glowing in the optical centers of her brain. She watched the little green indicators, paying little attention as long as they stayed green.

The target rolled over the near horizon in an instant—a silver-bright pattern of solar collectors, transmission aerials, dishes pointed at different parts of the sky . . . In the middle squatted the gleaming bulk of the freighter that had been sent to retrieve the base personnel, its docking tube still connected to the big cargo airlock.

Reese had a number of choices for gaining entry: there were two personnel airlocks, or she could go through one of the freighter locks and then through the docking tube. There were nine personnel on station, five humans and four Powers.

They can brew explosives with the stuff they've got on station, Berger had told her. *But they can't put anything too big around the airlock, or they'd decompress the whole habitat—and they don't have enough stored air to repressurize. They can't set off anything too big inside, or they'd wreck their work. It's too small a place for them to plan anything major. We figure they'll depend on small explosives, and maybe gas.*

The base rolled closer. Reese felt her limbs moving easily in the webbing, the hum of awareness in her nerves and blood. A concrete certainty of her capabilities. All the things she had been unable to live without.

Coolant flow had increased, the suit baking in the sun. The webbing around her body was chafing her. She thought of explosive, of gas, the way the poison clouds had drifted through the tunnels on Archangel, contaminating everything, forcing her to live inside her suit for days, not even able to take a shit without risking burns on her ass . . . at least this was going to be quick, however it went.

Reese decided to go in through one of the small personnel airlocks—the brains inside the rock might have decided the cargo ship was expendable and packed its joints with homemade explosive. She maneuvered the Wolf in a slow somersault and dropped feet-first onto the velcro strip by Airlock Two. Berger wanted her to get in without decompressing the place if she could—there was stuff inside he didn't want messed up. Reese bent and punched the emergency entrance button, and to her surprise

she began to feel a faint humming through her feet and the hatch began to roll up . . . she'd planned to open the hatch manually.

How naïve were these people? she wondered. Or was there some surprise in the airlock, waiting for her?

You're gonna c-carry that stuff? Vickers had asked in surprise, as he noticed the pistol snugged under the armpit and the long knife strapped to her leg.

I don't want to depend entirely on the Wolf, she'd said. *If it gets immobilized somehow, I want to be able to surprise whoever did it.*

There'd been an amused grin on Vickers' face. *They immobilize the Wolf, they sure as hell can immobilize* you.

Adjust the webbing anyway, she'd said. Because battle machinery always went wrong sooner or later, because if the mission directive didn't give her backup, she'd just have to be her own. Because she just didn't *like* the Wolf, its streamlined design, its purposeful intent. Because even to someone accustomed to violence, the thing was obscene.

Reese knelt by the airlock, pulled a videocamera from her belt, and held it over the airlock, scanning down . . . and fought back a wave of bile surging into her throat, because the lock was full of dead men.

Mental indicators shifted as, with a push of her mind, she ordered her attitudinal jets to separate the Wolf from the velcro parking strip, then drop into the lock. The dead swam in slow motion as she dropped among them. Her heart crashed in her chest.

The crew of the freighter, she thought. The rebels had put them in here, not having anyplace else. Their skins were grey, the tongues protruding and black. Some kind of poison, she thought.

"Welcome to Cuervo Gold," she said, and laughed. Nerves.

She hit the button to cycle the airlock, found it refused to work. Incurious dead eyes gazed at her as she cranked the outer door shut manually, then planted thermocharges on the inner door locks. She drifted up to the top of the airlock again, the Wolf's horns scratching the outer door. The dead men rose with her, bumping gently against the Wolf's arms and legs.

Reese curled her legs under her, protecting the Wolf's more vulnerable head and back. Adrenaline was beating a long tattoo in her pulse.

A vulture smile crossed her face. Her nerves sang a mad little song. *Here's where I take it up the ass,* she thought, and pulsed through her wetware the radio code to set off the detonators.

The lock filled with scorching bright light, smoke, molten blobs of bright metal. Air entered the lock with a prolonged scream. Suddenly her olfactory sensors were overwhelmed with the smell of scorched metal, burning flesh. Her gorge rose. She pulsed a command to cut out the

smell, then moved down to the inner lock door, seized it, rolled it up with the enhanced strength of the Wolf . . .

An explosion went off right in her face. Projectiles thudded into corpse flesh, cracked against the faceplate. She and the dead men went flying back, slamming against the outer hatch. Her pulse roared in her ears. She gave the Wolf a command to move down, and move down fast.

Her nerves were shrieking as she smashed into a wall of the airlock, corrected, flew down again, out the lock this time, cracked into another wall. Her teeth rattled. A homemade claymore, she thought, explosive packed in a tube with shrapnel, bits of jagged alloy, wire, junk. Command-detonated, most likely, so that meant someone was here watching the airlock door. Targeting displays flashed bright red on the interior of her faceplate. She turned and fired. Slammed into a wall again. Fired a second time.

The targets died. Fixed to each of the Wolf's upper forearms was a semiautomatic ten-gauge shotgun firing shells packed with poison flechettes. Reese had more deadly equipment available—a small grenade launcher on the left lower forearm, and a submachine gun on the right, gas projectors on her chest—but the op plan was to kill the targets without taking a chance on disturbing any of the valuable equipment or experiments.

Dollops of blood streamed into the near-weightlessness, turning into crimson spheres. A man and a woman, one holding some kind of homemade beam weapon she'd never got the chance to fire, were slowly flying backward toward the sprayed grey plastic walls, their hearts and lungs punctured by a dozen flechettes each. Their faces were frozen in slow-gathering horror at the sight of the Wolf. Reese tried to move, then hit the wall again. She realized the shrapnel had jammed one of her maneuvering jets full on. Her wetware wove routines to compensate, then she leaped past the dying pair and through an open doorway.

No one was in the next series of partitioned rooms, the crew quarters. These people were incredibly naïve, she thought, hiding out next to an airlock they knew was going to be blown and not even getting into vac suits. They should have put the claymore on the interior hatch door, not inside the station itself. Maybe they couldn't face going into where they'd put the crew they'd killed. These weren't professionals, they were a bunch of eggheads who hadn't known what they were getting into when they signed their declaration of independence from a policorp that could not even afford to acknowledge their existence.

They weren't soldiers, but they were still volunteers. They'd already killed people, quite coldly it seemed, in the name of whatever science they were doing here. She clenched her teeth and thought about how

some people, no matter how smart they were, remained just too stupid to live.

There was a new bulkhead door welded to the exterior of the crew quarters. Reese blew it open the same way as the airlock, then jetted through. Shrieks sounded on her audio thread, the strange organ sounds Powers made through their upper set of nostrils. Even as her mind squalled at the unearthly sight of a fast-moving, centauroid pair of aliens, she fired. They died before they could fire their homemade weapons. Her memory flashed on the video, the actor-Steward eradicating aliens with his shotgun. An idiotic memory.

She went through a door marked with biohazard warnings. The door gave a soft hiss as she opened it.

The next room was brightly lit, humming with a powerful air conditioning unit, filled with computer consoles plugged into walls of bare metal, not plastic. Cable stretched to and from something that looked like a hundred-liter aquarium filled with what appeared to be living flesh. Weird, she thought. It looked as if the meat was divided by partitions, like honeycomb in a cultured hive. Silver-grey wires, apparently variable-lattice thread, were woven through the meat. Elsewhere an engine hummed as it pumped crimson fluid. Monitors drew jagged lines across screens, holographic digits floated in air.

Weird, she thought again. Alien biochemistry.

There were three other rooms identical to the last. No one was in the first two.

In the third was a single man, gaunt, silver-haired. He was floating by the room's aquarium, a frown on his face. He was in a vac suit with the helmet in his hand, giving the impression he simply didn't want to bother to put it on.

He looked at Reese as she came in. There was no fear in his eyes, only sadness.

He spoke as he pushed off from the aquarium, floating to the empty alloy ceiling, where Reese's shot wouldn't hit his experiment by mistake.

"It's over," he said. "Not that it matters."

Reese thought of Steward in the hospital bed, dying for something else equally stupid, equally futile, and filled the man's face with poison darts.

Past the next seal two Powers tried to burn her with acid. The stuff smoked pointlessly on her ceramic armor while she killed them. One of the remaining humans tried to surrender, and the other tried to hide in a toilet. Neither tactic worked. She searched the place thoroughly, found no one else, and disarmed the traps at each of the airlocks.

There was a pain deep in her skull. The air in the suit had begun to taste bad, full of sour sweat, burnt adrenaline. Sadness drifted through

her at the waste, the stupidity of it all. Twelve more dead, and all for nothing.

Reese left the bodies where they lay—nobody was paying her to clean the place up—and used the other personnel lock to return to *Voidrunner*. Once she was in sight of the ship she pointed one of her microwave antennae at the ship and gave the code signaling success: "Transmit the following to base. *Mandate. Liquid. Consolidation.*" A combination of words unlikely to be uttered by accident.

She cycled through the ship's central airlock. Pain hammered in her brain, her spine. Time to get out of this obscene contraption. The door opened.

Targeting displays flashed scarlet on the interior of her faceplate. Reese's nerves screamed as the Wolf's right arm, with her arm in it, rose. The ten-gauge exploded twice and the impact spun Vickers back against the opposite wall. He impacted and bounced lightly, already dead. "*No!*" Reese cried, and the Wolf moved forward, brushing the body aside. Reese's arms, trapped in the suit's webbing, rose to a combat stance. She tried to tug them free. Targeting displays were still flashing. Reese tried to take command of the suit through the interface stud. It wouldn't respond.

"*Take cover!*" Reese shouted. "*The Wolf's gone rogue!*" She didn't know whether the suit was still on transmit or whether anyone was listening. The Wolf had visible light and IR detectors, motion scanners, scent detectors, sensors that could detect the minute compression wave of a body moving through air. There was no way the Wolf would miss anyone in the ship, given enough time.

Reese's heart thundered in her chest. "Get into vac suits!" she ordered. "Abandon ship! Get onto the station. Try and hold out there."

Chung's voice snapped over the outside speakers. "Where the hell are you?" At least someone was listening.

"I'm moving upship toward the control room. Oh, fuck." The heads-up display indicated the Wolf had detected motion from the docking cockpit, which meant the armored bulkhead door was open.

The Wolf caught Falkland as he was trying to fly out of the cockpit and get to an airlock. The flechettes failed to penetrate the exoskeleton, so the Wolf flew after him, caught him bodily. Reese felt her left hand curling around the back of Falkland's head, the right hand draw back to strike. She fought against it. Falkland was screaming, trying to struggle out of the Wolf's grip. "*I'm not doing this!*" Reese cried, wanting him to know that, and closed her eyes.

Her right arm punched out once, twice, three times. The Wolf began to move again. When Reese opened her eyes there was blood and bone spattering the faceplate.

"I'm still heading upship," Reese said. "I don't think the Wolf knows where you are."

Chung didn't answer. No point, Reese thought, in his sending a radio signal that might give away his position. The Wolf reached the forward control room, then began a systematic search of the ship, moving aft. Reese reported the suit's movements, hoping to hell he'd get away. The ship was small, and a search wouldn't take long.

Custom thread, Vickers had told her. *Woven into the target-acquisition unit.* Berger had done it, she knew, not only wanting to wipe out the station personnel but anyone who knew of Cuervo's existence. She was riding in an extermination cyberdrone now, trapped inside its obscene, purposeful body. *Mandate. Liquid. Consolidation.* The code had sent the Wolf on its rampage. The liquidation is mandated. Consolidate knowledge about Cuervo.

Displays flickered on the screen. The thing had scented Chung. Reese could do nothing but tell him it was coming.

Chung was by the aft airlock, halfway into the rad suit he'd need to flee through the airless engine space. His face was fixed in an expression of rage. "*Steward!*" Reese screamed. The ten-gauge barked twice, and then the Wolf froze. The displays were gone. The Wolf, still with considerable momentum, continued to drift toward the aft bulkhead. It struck and rebounded, moving slowly toward Chung.

Reese tried to move in the suit, but its joints were locked. Her crashing pulse was the loudest sound in the helmet. She licked sweat from her upper lip, felt it running down her brows. Chung's body slowly collapsed in the insignificant gravity of the asteroid. Drops of blood fell like slow-motion rubies. The gravity wasn't enough to break the surface tension, and the droplets rested on the deck like ball bearings, rolling in the circulating air . . .

Reese's heart stopped as she realized that the sound of the Wolf's air-circulation system had ceased. She had only the air in the suit, then nothing.

Her mind flailed in panic. Shouting, her cries loud in her ears, she tried to move against the locked joints of the Wolf. The Wolf only drifted slowly to the deck, its limbs immobile.

Like Archangel, she thought. Nothing to look forward to but dying in a suit, in a tunnel, in the smell of your own fear. Just like her officers had always wanted. She tasted bile and fought it down.

I'm using air, she thought, and clamped down, gulping twice, trying to control her jackhammer heart, her panicked breath.

Chung's furious eyes glared into hers at a distance of about three feet. She could see a reflection of the Wolf in his metal teeth. Reese began to move her arms and legs, testing the tension of the web.

There was a pistol under her left arm. If she could get to it with her right hand, she might be able to shoot her way out of the suit somehow.

Fat chance.

But still it was something to do, anyway. She began to move her right arm against the webbing, pulling it back. Blood rubies danced before her eyes. She managed to get her hand out of the glove, but there was a restraining strap against the back of her elbow that prevented further movement. She pushed forward, keeping her hand out of the glove, then drew back. Worked at it slowly, synchronizing the movement with her breath, exhaling to make herself smaller. Steward, she thought, would have been quoting Zen aphorisms to himself. Hers were more direct. *You can get smaller if you want to*, she thought, *you've done it before.*

She got free of the elbow strap, drew her arm back, felt her elbow encounter the wall of the suit. She was beginning to pant. *The air can't be gone this quickly*, she thought, and tried to control panic as she pulled back on her arm, as pain scraped along her nerves. Sweat was coating her body. She tried to think herself smaller. She could feel warm blood running down her arm. The Wolf was saturated with the scent of fear.

Reese screamed as her arm came free, part agony, part exultation. She reached across her chest, felt the butt of the pistol. It was cold in her hand, almost weightless.

Where to point it? She could try blowing out the faceplate, but she'd have the barrel within inches of her face, and the faceplate was damn near impervious anyway. The bullet would probably ricochet right into her head. The Wolf was too well armored.

Chung's angry glare was making it impossible for her to think. Reese closed her eyes and tried to think of the schematics she'd studied, the location of the variable-lattice thread that contained the suit's instructions.

Behind her, she thought. Pressed against her lower spine was the logic thread that operated the Wolf's massive limbs. If she could wreck the thread, the locked limbs might move.

She experimented with the pistol. There wasn't enough room to completely angle the gun around her body.

Sweat floated in salty globes around her as she thought it through, tried desperately to come up with another course of action. The air grew foul. Reese decided that shooting herself with the pistol would be quicker than dying of asphyxiation.

She tried to crowd as far over to the right as possible, curling the gun against her body, holding it reversed with her thumb on the trigger. The cool muzzle pressed into her side, just below the ribs. Line it up carefully, she thought. You don't want to have to do this more than once. She tried

to remember anatomy and what was likely to get hit. A kidney? Adrenal glands?

Here's where I really *take it up the ass*, she thought. She screamed, building rage, and fired . . . and then screamed again from pain. Sweat bounced against the faceplate, spattering in the fierce momentum of the bullet's pressure wave.

The Wolf's limbs unlocked and the cyberdrone sagged to the deck. Reese gave a weak cheer, then shrieked again from the pain.

She had heard it wasn't supposed to hurt when you got hit, not right away. Another lie, she thought, invented by the officer class.

There was something wrong with the world, with the way it was manifesting itself. She realized she was deaf from the pistol blast.

Reese leaned back, took a deep breath of foul air. Now, she thought, comes the easy part.

Reese managed to put her right arm back into the sleeve, then use both arms—the armor, thankfully, was near weightless—to get herself out of the suit. She moved to the sick bay and jabbed endorphin-analogue into her thigh, then X-rayed herself on the portable machine. It looked as if she hadn't hit anything vital, but then she wasn't practiced at reading X-rays, either. She patched herself up, swallowed antibiotics, and then out of nowhere the pain slammed down, right through the endorphin. Every muscle in her body went into spasm. Reese curled into a ball, her body a flaming agony. She bounced gently off one wall, then another. Fought shuddering waves of nausea. Tears poured from her eyes. It hurt too much to scream.

It went on forever, for days. Loaded on endorphins, she looted the station, moving everything she could into the freighter, then pissed bright blood while howling in agony. Fevers raged in her body. She filled herself with antibiotics and went on working. Things—people, aliens, hallucinations—kept reaching at her, moving just outside her field of vision. Sometimes she could hear them talking to her in some strange, melodic tongue.

She grappled *Voidrunner* to the freighter's back, then lifted off Cuervo and triggered the charges. She laughed at the bright blossoms of flame in the locks, the gush of air that turned to white snow in the cold vacuum, and then into a bright rainbow as it was struck by the sun. Reese accelerated toward Earth for as long as she could stand it, then cut the engines.

There was a constant wailing in her ears, the cry of the fever in her blood. For the next several days—one of them was her birthday—Reese hung weightless in her rack, fought pain and an endless hot fever, and

studied the data she'd stolen, trying to figure out why nine tame scientists were willing to commit murder over it.

The fever broke, finally, under the onslaught of antibiotics. Her urine had old black blood now, not bright new crimson. She thought she was beginning to figure out what the station crew had been up to.

It was time to decide where she was going to hide. The freighter and the tug were not registered to her, and her appearance with them was going to result in awkward questions. She thought about forging records of a sale—credentials, after all, were her specialty. Reese decided to tune in on the broadcasts from Earth and see if there were any new places for refugees to run to.

To her surprise she discovered that Ram's executive board on Prince Station had fallen three days before, and Cheney had been made the new chairman. She waited another two days, studying the data she'd stolen, the bottles of strange enzymes and tailored RNA she had moved to the freighter's cooler, and then beamed a call to Prince and asked for S. C. Vivekenanda. She was told the vice president of communications was busy. "I can wait," she said. "Tell him it's Waldman."

Ken's voice came on almost immediately. "Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm coming your way," Reese told him. "And I think I've got your architecture of liberation with me. But first, we've got to cut a deal."

What the lab's inhabitants had been up to wasn't quite what Ken had been talking about that gusty spring night in Uzbekistan, but it was close. The Brighter Suns biologists and artificial intelligence people had been working on a new way of storing data, a fast and efficient way, faster than variable-lattice thread. They had succeeded in storing information in human DNA.

It had been tried before. Genetically altered humanity had been present for a century, and the mysteries of the genetic mechanism had been thoroughly mapped. There had long been theories that genetic material, which succeeded in coding far more information on its tiny strand than any comparable thread-based technology, would provide the answer to the endless demand for faster and more efficient means of data storage.

The theories had always failed when put into practice. Just because specialists could insert desirable traits in a strand of human DNA didn't mean they had the capability of doing it at the speed of light, reading the genetic message the strand contained at similar speed, or altering the message at will. The interactions of ribosomes, transfer RNA, and enzymes were complex and interrelated to the point where the artificial intelligence/biologist types had despaired of trying to control them with current technology.

Alien genetics, it turned out, were simple compared to the human.

Power DNA chains were much shorter, containing half the two hundred thousand genes in a human strand, without the thousands of repetitions and redundancies that filled human genes. Their means of reproducing DNA were similar, but similarly streamlined.

And the Power method of DNA reproduction was compatible with human genetics. The transfer and message RNA were faster, cleaner, more controllable. Information transfer had a theoretically astounding speed—a human DNA strand, undergoing replication, unwound at 8000 RPM. Power RNA combined with human DNA made data transfers on thread look like slow motion.

Once the control technology was developed, information could be targeted to specific areas of the DNA strand. The dominant genes could remain untouched; but the recessive genes could be altered to contain information. Nothing could be kept secret when any spy could code information in his own living genetic makeup. And no one could discover the spy unless they knew what code he was using and what they were looking for.

The architecture of liberation. Risk-free transfer of data.

It would be years before any of this was possible—Prince Station's newly hired biologists would have to reconstruct all the station's work and then develop it to the point where it was commercially viable. But Prince Station was going to have its new source of technology, and Reese a new source of income—she'd asked for a large down payment in advance of a small royalty that should nevertheless make her a billionaire in the next forty years. She'd asked for that, plus Prince's help in disposing of a few other problems.

Reese looked down at her double, lying on a bed in a room that smelled of death. Her twin's eyes were closed, her breasts rose and fell under a pale blue sheet. Bile rose in Reese's throat.

Reese was blonde again, her nose a little straighter, her mouth a little wider. She had a new kidney, a new eardrum. New fingerprints, new blue irises. She liked the new look. The double looked good, too.

Two bodies, a man and a woman, were sprawled at the foot of the bed: assassins, sent by Berger to kill her. They had followed a carefully laid trail to her location here on Prince, and when they came into her apartment they'd been shot dead by Prince's security men firing from concealment in the wide bedroom closet. Reese had waited safely in the next room, her nerves burning with adrenaline fire while she clutched Ken's hand; her nerves alert for the sound of gunfire, she watched her double breathe under its sheet.

Then the security people came for the mannikin. They were going to kill it.

The double was Reese's clone. Her face had been restructured the same way Reese's had, and her artificial eyes were blue. Her muscles had been exercised via electrode until they were as firm as Reese's. There was even a metal pin in her ankle, a double of the one Reese carried. The clone was an idiot—her brain had never contained Reese's mind.

The idea was to make it appear that Reese and the assassins had killed each other. Reese looked down at her double and felt her mouth go dry. The security people were padding around the room, trying to make appearances perfect. Hot anger blazed behind Reese's eyes. Fuck this, she thought.

She pried the pistol out of one of the assassins' hands and raised it.

She was a tunnel rat, she thought. An animal, a coward, disloyal. Sometimes she needed reminding.

"It's not murder," Ken said, trying to help.

"Yes, it is," Reese said. She raised the killer's gun—an ideal assassin's weapon, a compressed-air fletcher—and fired a silent dart into the mannikin's thigh. Then she closed her eyes, not wanting to see the dying thing's last spasm. Instead she saw Steward, dying in his own silent bed, and felt a long grey wave of sadness. She opened her eyes and looked at Ken.

"It's also survival," she said.

"Yes. It is."

A cold tremor passed through Reese's body. "I wasn't talking about the clone."

While Ken's assistants made it look as if she and the assassins had killed each other, Reese stepped through the hidden door into the next apartment. Her bag was already packed, her identity and passport ready. Credentials, she thought, her specialty. That and killing helpless people. Group rates available.

She wanted to live by water again. New Zealand sounded right. It was getting to be spring there now.

"You'll come back?" Ken asked.

"Maybe. But in the meantime, you'll know where to send the royalties." There was pain in Ken's eyes, in Stewart's eyes. Attachments were weakness, always a danger. Reese had a vision of the Street, people parting, meeting, dying, in silence, alone. She wouldn't be safe on Prince and couldn't be a part of Ken's revolution. She was afraid she knew what it was going to turn into, once it became the sole possessor of a radical new technology. And what that would turn Ken into.

Reese shouldered her bag. Her hands were still trembling. Sadness beat slowly in her veins. She was thirty-seven now, she thought. Maybe there were sports she shouldn't indulge in.

Maybe she should just leave.

"Enjoy your new architecture," she said, and took off.

She had been up here too long. This place—and everyplace else she'd ever been—was too damn small. She wanted sea air, to live in a place with seasons, with wind.

She wanted to watch the world grow small again. ●



NEXT ISSUE

"There is a saying along the South Road," said the blue man, "that no man passes Aurin Tree twice..." So begins our February cover story, "Aurin Tree," by M.J. ENGH—a strange and evocative story in which the wanderer Poal, Lord Moon, and the mysterious blue man set forth on a perilous quest through strange wonders and stranger dangers to the magical Aurin Tree...and don't be too sure that this is the fantasy that it first appears to be! **JACK McDEVITT** is also on hand for February, and from the lands of myth and enchantment he takes us to the cold depths of space for the mystery-thriller "Dutchman": when the famous warship *Corsarius*, supposedly destroyed in battle many years before, is found orbiting a deserted planet, there are sure to be questions asked—but *some* questions may be better left unanswered... And, of course, the February issue also features the thrilling conclusion of **MICHAEL SWANWICK's** big new novel *Vacuum Flowers*, as Rebel and Wyeth travel to Old Earth, the most haunted and mysterious place in the solar system, to do battle with the enigmatic Comprise itself...

Also in February: **JAMES P. BLAYLOCK** tells us the deceitedly odd story of "Myron Chester and the Toads"; **ISAAC ASIMOV** returns with the latest George and Azazel story, "The Fights of Spring"; and **CHERIE WILKERSON** relates the poignant tale of "The Moment of the Rose." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for the February issue on your newsstands on December 16, 1986.

COMING UP: great new stories by **Robert Silverberg, Lucius Shepard, Orson Scott Card, Pat Cadigan, Harry Turtledove, Pat Murphy, George Alec Effinger, Kim Stanley Robinson, Bruce Sterling, Neal Barrett, Jr., Jane Yolen, Lewis Shiner,** and others. Subscribe now!

by John Barnes

DIGRESSIONS FROM THE SECOND PERSON FUTURE

Since writing "Digressions from the Second Person Future," John Barnes has sold his first novel, *The Man Who Pulled Down the Sky*, to our new book line (in conjunction with Contemporary Books Congdon & Weed), *Isaac Asimov Presents*. The novel will be available in the spring of 1987. The following story marks his second appearance in *IAsfm*, and we hope to be seeing a lot more from him.



art: J.K. Potter

I cannot begin with "you will be" without raising questions. How do I know? Who are you?

It is possible that I won't answer them.

You will be a mammal. You will have, relative to the other creatures around you, a big brain; you will have forepaws that can grasp and hold.

You will be descended from something now alive. Perhaps me. Perhaps Henry, my white mouse who escaped when I was twelve. I never did find Henry, despite a thorough search. But then again, my father may have set a trap, killed Henry, and disposed of the body without my knowing. It would be like him.

At any rate, you will be this mammal. You will be less than a half-day's easy walk from home—your word for it, of course, will not be "home." Your eyes will scan the meadow in front of you, waiting for something slow and stupid you can kill with the piece of broken glass you hold in your forepaw. You will turn often to look and hear behind you; sometimes you will sniff the wind, unaware of how little you can smell now, compared with what your ancestors could before the brain gave up its old marriage to the nose and took up with the word.

By the sun, it will be past noon. Around you, gold mottles of sunlight will swim in the shadows; one length of your body in front of you, the shadows of the trees will disappear at a sharp line, and beyond that line the yellow and green of the meadow will begin. Flies and grasshoppers, familiar to you and me and the dinosaurs, will circle over the meadow—and, in pursuit of them, something larger and smarter, a bat or a winged lizard, jaws snapping.

There are two ways nature handles information—genes and brains. Bugs picked genes. A couple of phone calls back, I argued at length with my father that the bugs were right, and that their unthinkably longer unchanged survival proves it. He enjoys arguments like that.

When you look down at the forepaw clutching the glass knife, the forepaw will be hairy and scarred, the glass shaped and sharpened by forepaws before yours, by so many so long before that you do not know all the names that went with the forepaws. You won't look down long. Some older one of your kind, a parent or mentor, will have taught you that such absorption in a nearby, unimportant object, away from home, is dangerous and foolish.

When you look up the beast will be crossing the field, huge, scaly, muscular, blundering, and stupid. I might notice that it is many tons of meat; because it will be utterly inaccessible, you will ignore it.

When the big scaly thing is halfway across the meadow, there will be a great roar, fire will come up from the ground, and a wave of pressure will pound against your face like a dense wad of old leaves. When you look back up, you will see the big thing dead, a whole leg torn off, blood

puddling under it from torn arteries, the head turned sideways on the broken neck, exposing the charred and blackened underjaw.

From when I write, I could say that the big reptile will have stepped on a long-buried tank of gasoline, the finally-corroded aluminum giving way and sending sparks into the separated, self-jellied fuel, or I could say he will have stepped on an unimaginably old land mine, or a buried truckload of ammonia fertilizer or dynamite. But by the rules I can say no such thing to you. Despite my faith that you will be able to understand brush, grass, trees, home, sun, and any number of other things, I cannot believe that you will understand anything that I might consider a plausible cause of the explosion. But physical plausibility matters to me—my father's influence, I suppose—so I'll settle on the ammonia fertilizer.

It's funny how so many little clues you notice without making sense of them can swarm back at you later, forcing you to a conclusion years afterward. I think in all probability Dad did set a trap for Henry.

And of course he would not tell me.

Henry was all right with Dad as long as he lived in his cage in my room. I fed him, gave him water, changed his litter—did all the things that adults give children pets for when they decide that the child in question should learn responsibility. I also talked to Henry a lot while I held and petted him. To be honest, I never did learn to like the spidery creepiness of his little paws on my palm, or that slick snaky tail, or the snotty-wet probing of his pink nose. I am sure Henry liked me even less—I knew that even then—but it didn't matter. I needed someone to talk to; he was physically dependent on me. If it wasn't friendship, it was still something.

I think my father understood some of that. I remember one of his infrequent visits to my room. He had come home earlier than usual one night, while I was still awake. When he came into my room, he made a big point of saying hello to Henry. I was eleven—much too old to believe that Henry cared whether people talked to him, but a little too young to recognize my father's awkward overture. I had been wondering about my own sanity—for godsakes every serious conversation I was having was with a *mouse*—and my first thought was that Dad, hard-pressed as he always was with work, was really losing it.

After the clumsy start, though, we just talked about what I was finding in the drop of pondwater I had under the microscope. He loved that kind of thing; I even taught him the names of a couple of paramecia I had identified from library books. He was really interested—on the road all the time as a tech sales rep, he spent a lot of time in Motel Sixes and Howard Johnson's with *Scientific American, Popular Mechanics,* and so on. He'd talk about things he'd read over the big family dinners on the weekends—I thought that was neat.

I had forgotten; it sort of came back with Henry, who was supposed to be just a way of personifying one of your possibly rodent ancestors. I know it's supremely unlikely that you will be descended from Henry.

Too bad for you, too, because for a mouse, he was pretty smart, almost human.

At any rate, you will be where I left you, staring at the still-smoking but mostly edible remains of that huge reptile, the probable descendant of a crocodile. You will not exactly think—surely not in words, no more than I would. You will just rush forward to the fallen reptile, skirting burning clumps of grass, hardly aware of what you are doing. You will jump and scramble up the scaly belly of the huge thing, standing in a moment on the side of its rib cage.

From a crude skin bag slung like a bandolier over your shoulder—you will not have any idea of what a bandolier might be, and your shoulders will be less square than mine so that the bag often slides down—from that bag you will pull something else, a thing I would recognize as a glass bottle with the bottom broken off and the broken edges rubbed smooth with quartz, and raise it to your lips, and blow on it like a trumpet. You will blow again and again until at last faint, similar sounds come back to you.

When you look down you will see the carrion-eaters gathering around you. Your mental inventory will take no more than a heartbeat: you will have two sharp throwing sticks, your bottle horn, your glass knife, and the limited use of your hind claws and vestigial fangs.

Observing those hind claws and the remains of your ancestors' fangs, I realize that unlikely as you will be to be Henry's descendant, you will be even less likely to be mine. That sort of evolutionary outcome is remarkably unlikely in a big-brained species like mine—in the time needed to evolve those organic weapons, solving a problem in species survival by a slow, random, genetic process, a very few such big brains can easily make the long trip from fire and spear to nuclear fission and rockets, solving the same problem many times more efficiently.

I talked about just such a problem with my father the last time I talked to him on the phone. We saw it as kind of the ground under the mythic figure of original sin—well, I did. Dad called it the "Promethean apple"—I didn't comment on that tangled image, not wanting to offend him. A brainy species can survive only as a brainy species. No beneficent natural process can ever again make you stupid, thus reuniting you with nature. You and your descendants will be cursed with all that excess processing capacity—and thus your potential for malice and ability to act on it, for as long as you walk the planet, just as my species is cursed.

Dad still prefers science to all other topics. Politics, sports, all that's nothing to him. We talked about the irreversibility of the evolution of

intelligence for over an hour—an expensive call, but since Mom died it's about the only thing that breaks his loneliness.

Maybe on the next call I'll ask him about Henry. I keep thinking it shouldn't matter to me, and I know it will not be communicated to you, but I'd like to know whether it is at all possible that Henry will have been your ancestor.

You, of course, will be unconcerned with all such things at the point I've narrated you into. You will be standing on that immense heap of fresh carrion, with the aerial scavengers—I call them vulture bats, you will call them something else—circling even lower. On the ground, facing you, will be a pack of what I will call just "big rats"—but by big I mean big as full-grown cocker spaniels, and they will not be rodents, not any more, anyway, but carnivores. What you will call them, and the bats, my palate's shape cannot accommodate.

They will slowly circle, warily, looking but not yet attacking, hoping for your unguarded back.

You will be turning, still up there on the smooth scaly side of the fallen monster, pivoting so that none of them gets a chance. You will be counting on daylight and the cowardice of the scavengers to hold them back. In your right forepaw, you will clutch a throwing stick, raised to stab rather than to throw, and in your left a knife.

They will circle, circle, circle, not quite bright enough to split into two groups and circle opposite ways. Their paws will thud on the thick turf, and now and then their fur will make a little brushing noise against the dry grass, but mostly you will hear only the vulture bats' crying. You will see the big rats' long teeth and staring green eyes, and you will toy with charging through, scattering them, and running away. But you will have blown your horn, and the other hunters will be here soon, and you will want to keep this meat untainted until they arrive.

A thought, perhaps in words, will come to you. You will whirl, careful of your footing on the scales, and fling your sharp, curved stick with a practiced snap of your wrist. It will gash into the leathery wing of a circling vulture bat; you will shout with delight as he struggles some distance from you before crashing to the ground, the stick still in his wing. At once, one of the big rats circling you will give a cry that I might say would sound like that of a bobcat, and charge at your victim. The rest will follow him, ducking and diving around the fallen bat, trying to get in for a death-bite.

The vulture bats will retreat to a prudent altitude. The rats will begin to toy with the shrieking wounded one. Temporarily, you will be master of the bigger prize. If they will not get bored with their game for some time, you will be fine.

You will climb down on the other side of the big dead thing, where

some grass will still be smoldering, and find, quickly, as many sticks as you can without getting so far from the carcass as to invite another winged attack. You will hastily build up the fire—you will know how to keep a fire, though not how to make one. You will tie twigs and grass on the end of a long stick, making something that would look to me like a crude broom, and you will set it by the fire, leaned up against the big corpse's back. Then you will leap up again, waving your remaining throwing stick to frighten the aerial enemy back to a respectful height.

By the time you will have done this, the shrieks will have ceased, and your other opponents will be tearing into the flesh of your victim, quarreling over it and pulling it apart between them. You will judge that with luck you may live through this, and you will be vaguely displeased to have enough time to consider the question—like many of my species, you will prefer actions to questions, especially violent busy actions to difficult important questions.

My father is no such person. Not that he tolerates open questions well—he's no better than most people at that. But the problem of his mortality never bothered him much.

In one of those occasional conversations we would have in my room, I remember, the subject came up. His view was that seeing somebody die—he'd been an operating room orderly in the army—was unpleasant, but other than that it was just like having them move away and never write. In my father's scheme, dying would be like having *everyone* move away and never write; sad and lonesome, perhaps, but routine.

I had thought my father held that idea because he was a hero, and I had thought he was a hero because he had been in the army. Actually he had served in peacetime and never left the United States; I knew that then but it somehow did not dim the fact that he had been a soldier, and that helped to fix an image of him in my mind. I don't know what ideas about him I may have derived from that; a lot of my solid certainty about him has slumped back into the fluid mystery of his clumping up the stairs to look in at me, thinking I was asleep, and the brush of his hand on the back of my head as he ran out to the car the next morning. I don't really know how he feels or felt about dying, or much about him from before my own memories of him.

When I talk with him on the phone next week, after we talk about Henry the mouse, we'll talk about death in general. Maybe we won't talk about science or his job or mine at all.

You will not have a job. You will have a role, but you will not have traveled far enough down the road to have jobs as yet, let alone to have individuals who will need them or define themselves in terms of them. There will be only what you will be doing now.

What you will be doing is watching the big rats finish off the vulture

bat, also keeping an eye upward against the vulture bats still circling. You will be waiting till the last moment to ignite and use the long torch against the big rats, because when it will be gone you will have to run away, leaving this valuable carcass to the other claimants. But you will be, for the moment, relaxed.

You will have enough attention to spare to enjoy the warm afternoon, but you will snap alert when the rats back away from where they will have been feeding.

A distant relative of the dead thing on which you stand will be coming out of the bushes. This one will have stayed truer to his ancestry—he will want that pile of meat on which you stand, and he will not object to eating you with it. The scavengers will scatter, and you will face the huge thing, ten times your body length, by yourself.

The eyes on the thing will be set close together in front around a short snout—a good arrangement for a solitary carnivore. They will be fixed on the beast under you; when you jump down, they will fix on you. I would call those eyes "catlike," and despite the reptile dullness behind them, there will be something else catlike about all this, because the big thing will move in slowly, as if to play with you, its ridiculous clawed fingers squeezing the ground as if feeling its way.

You will grab your long-handled torch and ignite it. It will blaze up at once. You will have nowhere to run—you will stare into those flat yellow unintelligent eyes endlessly as they draw nearer. In a burst of fury or despair, as the thing weaves sideways, crabbing a little before springing, you will rush toward it, jabbing your torch into that face.

But you will be off center. The hot torch end will destroy an eye instantly, searing the delicate outer surface, grinding black cinders and splinters into the clear jelly.

The creature's head will whip sideways as a thundering whistle of agony rolls from the open mouth. Emboldened or confused, you will thrust again, doing the same to the other eye. The head will snap around again as you jump back.

Bewildered, enraged, blind, it will turn after you, the jaws, big enough to pinch you in two, snapping shut just above your back. You will dodge inside the turn, and the scaly hide will brush against you. Some notion will form; the thing will not be able to raise its head very high because of the bony ridge at the base of its neck. You will leap, scrambling a moment on its rough side, and seat yourself on the back of the monster.

Sliding forward, drawing your remaining throwing stick from the bag, you will stab under that ridge over and over, looking for a severable artery, an opening to the medulla, the spinal cord, anything you can reach that will kill it.

The throwing stick will draw more blood with each jab, but still the

deep hooting howling will go on and on and the head will whip from side to side. Unable to reach you with its short tail or to roll over (the burdens imposed by evolutionary accident and the cube-square law respectively—a point of plausibility), the monster will not throw you off. You will stab and stab again until your arms ache.

At last the thing will collapse under you and you will stagger off it, your breath coming in difficult sobs. Then your head will snap up as a horn sings. The meadow will be filled with one, two, many hunters, and they will all raise their horns, blowing loud and then soft, sending the pitch from a shrill whistle to a deep moan over and over again, wild harmonies filling the meadow. Then you will raise your own horn and make all the sounds you feel, all that you have just felt, and when the horns are finally lowered there will be something new among all of you—the desire for the horns again.

That certainly won't be due to your heredity. I never did get Henry to like music. Lots of other sounds, but not that.

I had come up with the science fair project of doing some behavior mod with Henry—every time I put "Inna Gadda da Vida" on the turntable, I gave Henry an M&M. The idea was that eventually he would respond only to that sound, ignoring the Beatles, Peter, Paul, & Mary, and the Glenn Miller record I had borrowed from my father's cabinet, but running to the feeding slot at the first sound of Iron Butterfly.

It didn't work because he learned to listen for the switch being flipped. I tried putting a silent membrane switch into the line with an extension cord, and Henry developed an interest in the sound of the tone arm. I set the arm on manually, and he started responding to the electric motor on the turntable. The only thing he never paid any attention to was "Inna Gadda da Vida." Eventually I took my rock collection to the science fair.

The day Henry got away—I still don't know how; he was just missing from the cage—I kept turning my stereo on and off, hoping he'd pop out looking for an M&M. I even put on "Inna Gadda da Vida," but of course that didn't work either. Since the next morning I was going to Scout camp for a week, and my mother would be tending Henry, I couldn't very well hide the fact that he wasn't there. If he didn't show up I was going to be in a lot of trouble.

He didn't show up. I had noticed his disappearance at one P.M. At four, I told Mom and Dad. Dad questioned me about it, but then he noticed that I was on the edge of blubbering and stopped in mid-question, blushing and looking cockeyed up at the ceiling as he always did when he was embarrassed. He said Henry would either turn up or he wouldn't while I was gone, and if he did they'd take care of him.

Then he spent about an hour helping me pack up my stuff. The Scout camp was a cabin camp, more for working on merit badges than for real

camping. That was fine with me—I had just made Second Class, which meant I could finally work on the Nature, Chemistry, and Astronomy badges. I was worried about Henry, but I was too excited to feel it much.

The week went by in a blur—more fun than anything I had ever done before in my life, because they'd given us a real lab. Certainly it was more fun than wiring up doorbells and putting vinegar on litmus paper like we'd been doing all year in sixth grade science class. When I got home, there was still no Henry.

After a couple of weeks, Dad surprised me with a new mouse. I took good care of him, but I never named him or really talked to him.

Early on in writing this I realized that I knew exactly what my father had done as soon as I had left. He baited a trap, probably with a piece of Hershey bar, and when Henry was killed in the trap he threw the body away, at home (if it was before garbage day) or in some dumpster or trashcan (if it was after). I like to think it was after, because I can easily imagine my father wrapping a dead white mouse in a plastic sandwich bag, tucking it into his briefcase, and scribbling a note in his pocket calendar—something like "Dispose: mouse—2 minutes"—on the Before First Meeting list.

He didn't hate Henry or anything, but it was the simple and easy way to solve the mouse problem. He worked so many hours and spent so little time at home that the random threat a loose mouse posed to his comfort was intolerable.

Knowing him, I know. I know so well that it probably isn't worth bothering him about it on the next phone call. Besides, he'll want to talk about some things in the new issue of *Science News*.

Anyway, that's settled. And I want to get back to what this story is about. You will arrive home heading a triumphal parade of hunters bearing great slabs of the muscles and choicer organs of the dead reptiles. The fires will be stoked up, green sticks sharpened, and flat rocks heated; before sunset the smell of roasting meat will fill the camp. When the whole group, from the toothless old to the just-weaned, has gorged itself, someone will ask you how you came by the meat.

You won't simply tell them that one died by accident and you killed the other by stabbing it in the neck. Instead, you will tell your memories, one at a time, jumping when your story comes to a jump, stabbing at the fire when it comes to a stab. And when you come to the blowing horns, all the horns will blow together again. And again, you will be delighted to hear them.

But you will never hear the story I write now. You would not understand anyway. You could not understand the simplest things in it—microscopes and stereos and merit badges. So I rely on you to tell yours. ●



art: Hank Jankus

by Rudy Rucker

Rudy Rucker and his family lived for six years in Lynchburg, VA. This summer Mr. Rucker and his family left Lynchburg (not to be confused with Killeville) for San Jose, CA, where he is now an associate professor of computer science. His eleventh and twelfth books will be coming out in 1987: *Mindtools*, a popular science book about mathematics and information, and *Wetware* (Bluejay), a sequel to his award-winning novel *Software*.

Religious fervor filled the air. Twenty or thirty rows of mutants ringed the torchlit dias where Pally Love was holding forth. The dais was set up in the middle of what had once been a gymnasium. The gym had been part of a YMCA summer camp located on an island out in the Thomas River. The island was called Love Island now. It was the seat of Pally Love's Millenial Church of the Mystical Body of Christ. Pally was a doughy little man with a plain face. But what a voice!

"*They* call you gunjy mues," he shouted. "The Montviews, the Pigyears,

the Arkers . . . *they* want to kill you, yes they do. They set themselves up as mighty ones, and they seek to trample you beneath their feet. They see fit to tamper with the Lord God's new dispensation. Oh, sweet Jesus, what a time we're having here. *Oh,* what a time we are having on God's gray earth in these the last days. And these *are* the last days, my brethren, make no mistake about it. I'd like you to pause . . . and look around, dear friends. Look at your neighbors, look at each other, and ask yourself one simple question. One simple little question. Does Pally love me? Can I let Pally into my heart? Can *Christ,* through Pally, bring me a brighter day? Dear friends! If you say *yes,* if you say *yes Pally,* then you have received the greatest gift that man can receive. You have received the love that Christ has given *me* to give unto *you.* And this love . . ."

Meg Crash stood off to one side, watching Pally work out. Pretty good crowd of mues tonight, and most of them had brought something. The offerings were piled beside the dais: records, pieces of metal, liquor, car batteries, bags of food, even some tanks of gasoline. Pally was one of the only men in Killeville who managed to still drive a car. Pally Love, king of the gunjy mues. Not that Pally himself was a mutant. No way. Pally was fat and sleek and healthy as a prize stud-hog. That was part of his appeal to the mues: the fact that even though he was everything the mutants were not, Pally still loved them.

And why *shouldn't* Pally love the mues? They took good care of him. They took good care of Meg Crash too, for that matter, not that Meg could bring herself to really love them any more than Pally could. It was a rough job being Pally Love's head deaconess, especially rough ever since her brother Tab had left.

"Yes," Pally was shouting. "Come forward my darlings, drag your poor twisted bodies here and *merge* with the love of Christ, Christ the Son of God, the Christ whose body-cells are *us.* Join Him now, come *join Him* here and now!"

This was Meg's signal to start helping mues up onto the dais. A kid with no legs was already out in the aisle, so Meg helped that one first. The kid's head was all wrenched around to one side and his tongue was hanging out, but you could sense a keen intelligence in there anyway. One thing, mues weren't stupid, even if they did fall for Pally's line. Who could tell? Maybe he *was* helping them more than they were helping him. The whole giant leech business made Meg nervous . . . it was like the mues were using Pally to set the thing up.

"Flubba," said the kid, rolling an eye up at Meg. *"Flubba geep."*

His body tapered to a sort of point around the waist, but his arms were big and strong. She grabbed his hands and lugged him up to the dais. *That's it for* you, *gunjy mue,* Meg couldn't help thinking. *Time to become*

part of Pally's giant leech. He was probably skrenning her thoughts but it didn't seem to bother him.

Two others were at the edge of the platform already, and Meg helped all three up. She glanced out at the crowd . . . no one else was coming up tonight. The next thing was to undress these three. The boy with no legs wore only a long T-shirt, which came off easily enough. The next mue had a fairly normal body, dressed in jeans and T-shirt, but it didn't really have a head. There was just a sort of cavity-riddled hump between its shoulders. No telling which hole was for what. The jeans came off smoothly, but the T-shirt snagged on the ragged head-hump and Meg had to pull really hard. The last mue was perhaps female, very pale and wearing a nightgown. Stripping this off, Meg saw that its body was like a soft porcupine, with flesh-fingers sticking out all over. How did these things stay alive, anyway?

"Are you ready to join Christ's mystical body?" The veins in Pally's neck were standing out; his face was slick with sweat.

"Weddy, Pawwy!"

"Open the tabernacle, Reverend Crash!"

Meg walked over to the side of the gymnasium and threw open the door that led to the locker-room. The giant leech lived in there, a sort of group-creature made up of the merged bodies of scores of mues. It wouldn't do to let the thing near you . . . not unless you were ready to join it for good. A sweet, wet smell drifted out of the locker-room door. Meg could hear the heavy slithering, a sound like wet canvas bags being dragged across the cement floor. Taking no chances, she hurried across to the other side of the gym.

The rest of the mues, the ones not ready to merge tonight, followed Meg across the gym floor, dragging and flippering themselves along as fast as they could. Meg stood protectively in front of them, an electric cattle-prod in one hand. Pally used his car's generator to keep the prod charged up.

The gym floor was clear now, clear except for the little round platform in the middle. Pally was still on the platform, still yelling, with the three naked mues at his feet.

"Can you *feel* it?"

"Guh fee it."

"Are you *ready?*"

"Bluh weddy!"

"Do you *want* it?"

"Wah wanna!"

The tip of the giant leech poked out of the locker-room door now, and the crowd moaned with excitement. The giant leech ritual was still relatively new. Meg's twin brother Tab had invented it more or less by

accident one night . . . the last night before he'd taken off for some other part of Killeville. Pally had always ended his services by having some mues get up on the dais with him. Once they were up there, he'd sprinkle water and oil on them and say they were blessed. But that last night, Tab, drunk and disgusted, had filled Pally's water and oil pitchers with concentrated battery acid.

Now the one thing about mutants was their fantastic ability to recover from wounds. If you stuck a knife in a mue and pulled the blade back out, the cut would just close up. They healed like dough, no matter what. To kill a mue you had to practically cut it in half. Their ability to regenerate tissue was one of their two big survival traits, the other survival feature being enhanced psi powers. They could read minds and see things far away. *Skrenning*, they called it.

When Tab's acid had burned four mues' skins off that last night, the skins had taken a few minutes to grow back. But by then the flayed parts, where the mues touched, had already grown together. Presto, a group-creature, a new-born giant leech, a grex made of four mutants. Technically, a *grex* is a slug-like object formed by a group of slime-mold cells. Each of the cells has an independent existence, yet for purposes of reproduction they are able to join together, crawl about, and form a fruiting body. The combination of tissue regeneration and psi power enabled the mues to form just such a grex, a leech-like creature that lived and acted as a single organism.

Pally and Meg had been doing the ritual a few times a week now for several months. The giant grex held some sixty mues. Blessedly, it seemed satisfied with its life, though there was no telling what it thought about while resting in its locker-room. One thing for sure, no one was going in to investigate. Just throw a bunch of food in there once a day, and keep the door shut.

Now the huge group-mutant was slithering across the gymnasium floor, sliding closer and closer to the dais holding Pally and the three mues. There were eyes scattered all over the grex's surface, and there were bunches of hands here and there. Towards the front of a moist slit, the thing's tooth-filled mouth.

"The body of *Christ,*" bellowed Pally. "The mystical body of Christ!" Not wanting to take the chance of being eaten or absorbed, he shouted a last blessing and hurried over to Meg's side.

"Kwa," cried the porcupine-flesh-fingers mutant on the dais, *"Bah kwa!"* The one with no real head made a sort of high whistling sound and now the grex was at the edge of the dais.

Each time they did the giant leech ritual, the leech looked more developed, more integrated. At first it had been easy to pick out the individual members of the grex: they'd been like the constituent parts in

one of those old paintings where an allegorical face, say "Harvest" or "Spring," is made up of the fruits and flowers of the season. The giant leech had started as "Radiation," made up of dozens of skungy freaks. But now the grex was fully integrated, all smoothed out.

A web of veins lay under the pink, wet skin. There were eyes all over . . . like raisins in a pie. The bottom of the thing was covered with hair. Everyone's scalp had migrated there to give the grex something to "walk" on. The hairs all pointed backwards for traction, like mohair on the bottom of a cross-country ski. There was a row of ears along the grex's median line, and bunches of hands both fore and aft.

Meg's stomach was hardened from two years' work with Pally and the mues, but the sight of the giant leech always made her retch. Its muscular symmetry was somehow worse than the ragged deformities of the mues. Meg leaned forward, gagging, hoping she wouldn't actually vomit.

"Stop it," muttered Pally, right at her side. "Control yourself, Meg."

The grex was on the dais now. It arched itself up over the three waiting mues like a croquet wicket. The long slit-mouth was only for feeding . . . the thing had another method for absorbing new members, a disgusting, vaguely sexual procedure. As the grex arched over the three naked mues the one with no head began whistling louder, whistling like a tea-kettle. Perhaps it was in pain.

The hair on the grex's bottom was suddenly wet, wet and dripping. Some of the constituent mues' stomach tissues were down there to produce hydrochloric acid. The acid drizzled on the three naked forms, eating at their skins. Just as his face began to burn off, the kid with no legs shot Meg a hard glance, a look that said, *"I know why you're sorry for* me, *but you'll never know why I'm sorry for* you."

Once again, Meg wondered who was really using who. In a sense, she and Pally were the mues' servants . . . even though Pally thought it was the other way around. More than anything, Pally needed power and adulation. The normals, the people in the clans, thought Pally was a fool, a liar, and a bully. Pally *needed* to have the mues worship him. The clanspeople didn't think about Pally very much. If they spoke of him at all, it was only with weary contempt. The clans didn't hate Pally, but Pally hated the clans. Oh, did he hate the clans! The less they cared about him, the more he hated them. Sometimes he would preach to the mues about leading a crusade, a holy war against the unbelievers. Until now it had all been just so much talk. But with the giant leech . . . or with *ten* leeches . . .

The skin was pretty well gone from the three mues now, and the grex began slowly to lower itself down on them. Its wet bottom-hair parted to expose a long red welt, a strip of naked tissue that the new mues could

merge into. One of them cried out something like, "It is finished," and then it was. The great leech lay flat on the dais, calmly pulsing.

They all sang a hymn then, and the leech swayed to the beat. Standing well over to one side of the gym, Pally gave a closing harangue and sent the congregation on its way. Meg handed him the cattle-prod and went to stand by the exit door, trying to get a few more donations from the mues as they left.

"OK, Meg," called Pally as soon as the hall emptied. "Help me herd it back." Pally didn't like getting close to the big leech. He held the cattle prod out like someone holding a crucifix up to a vampire.

Just as Meg started towards Pally, the leech shuddered and slid off the dais, its long supple body flowing like water. Pally jerked convulsively, knocking loose the plug of the cord that led from the cattle-prod to his car outside. Moving faster than it ever had before, the leech flowed over the prod and put itself between Pally and the exit. Pally froze and shot Meg a desperate glance.

"Back to your room, guys," shouted Meg, putting some iron in her voice. She strode angrily towards the leech. "Turn around and go back in. We'll feed you double rations tomorrow."

The leech raised its front end up in a questioning way. Its broad mouth was slightly parted, revealing two carpets of teeth. Its eyes shifted from Pally to Meg and back again.

Meg took another step forward, and stamped her foot commandingly. "BACK! Go back to your room, and I'll get you a whole pig to eat tomorrow!"

Pally picked that moment to scream. His scream was lurid and juicy. The leech went for the sound. Moving so fast that it blurred, it darted over and clamped its mouth over Pally's head and shoulders. His screaming stopped almost right away. The leech humped itself up and bolted the rest of Pally down into its gullet. It was like watching a snake swallow a rat.

Meg ran outside, locking the door behind her. As soon as the door closed, she heard the heavy thud of the leech throwing itself against it. SPLANG. The door shuddered. SPLANG.

Pally's big car was out there running, still feeding juice into the cattle-prod's disconnected cord. Cooter, a black guy Meg's age, was sitting behind the wheel.

"What happened?" he yelled.

"The leech got Pally," answered Meg, getting in the car. "We better get out of here."

The door gave then, and the leech came speeding out. Cooter peeled out, but not fast enough. The leech flowed up over the car and the engine stalled. With the mass of sixty mues, the leech had them pinned in place.

For a moment nothing happened, and then the creature's hairy underside began sucking at the windows, trying to pop one loose.

"Don't open the door, Cooter, whatever you do."

Cooter unholstered his .45 and fired a few shots up through the car roof. Acid began drizzling in. Now the leech was thumping on the windows instead of sucking at them. A spiderweb of cracks spread across the windshield. Cooter leaned on the horn.

Suddenly the leech slid off them. All the noise had drawn the rest of Pally's private army out of their barracks. Five beefy guys that looked like good food. The leech wolfed down two of them, and the other three headed for the river. Cooter got the car restarted, and sped across the wood bridge that led from Pally's island to the shore.

"Stop here," said Meg. "Let's burn the bridge." Moving quickly, they got a drum of gasoline out of the car's trunk and slopped it all over the bridge's planks. They got back on shore and fired the bridge up. The sudden WHUMP of ignition singed Meg's eyebrows and threw her onto her back. In the firelight, they could see the leech racing along the island's shore, looking for the other men—or looking for a way to shore. It tried several times to go into the water, but each time the current forced it back.

"It's too heavy to swim," said Cooter. "And the water's too fast and deep for it to wade."

The great leech reared itself up by the shore and began silently swaying back and forth, jerky in the fire's light.

"It's worried," said Meg. "Good. It'll starve to death out there. Thank God it's not big enough to splash across!"

They got in the car to drive on up the hill into the city. But the road was full of dark figures. Mues. The grex was telepathically calling all mues, and they were flocking down to the river. Meg and Cooter stopped the car and stared back towards the island.

One by one the mues launched themselves into the current and floundered over to Pally's island. One by one they went and joined the body of the great leech. In half an hour it would be two or three times as big—big enough to crawl across the river.

Cooter put the car into gear and began edging forward through the torrent of mues.

"Where to, Meg?"

"As far as the gas'll take us." She leaned across and checked the gauge. "Let's shoot for Richmond."

Cooter eased the car up the hill that led down to the river. The mues thinned out at the top, and he stepped on the accelerator.

Bye-bye, Killeville, goodbye. ●



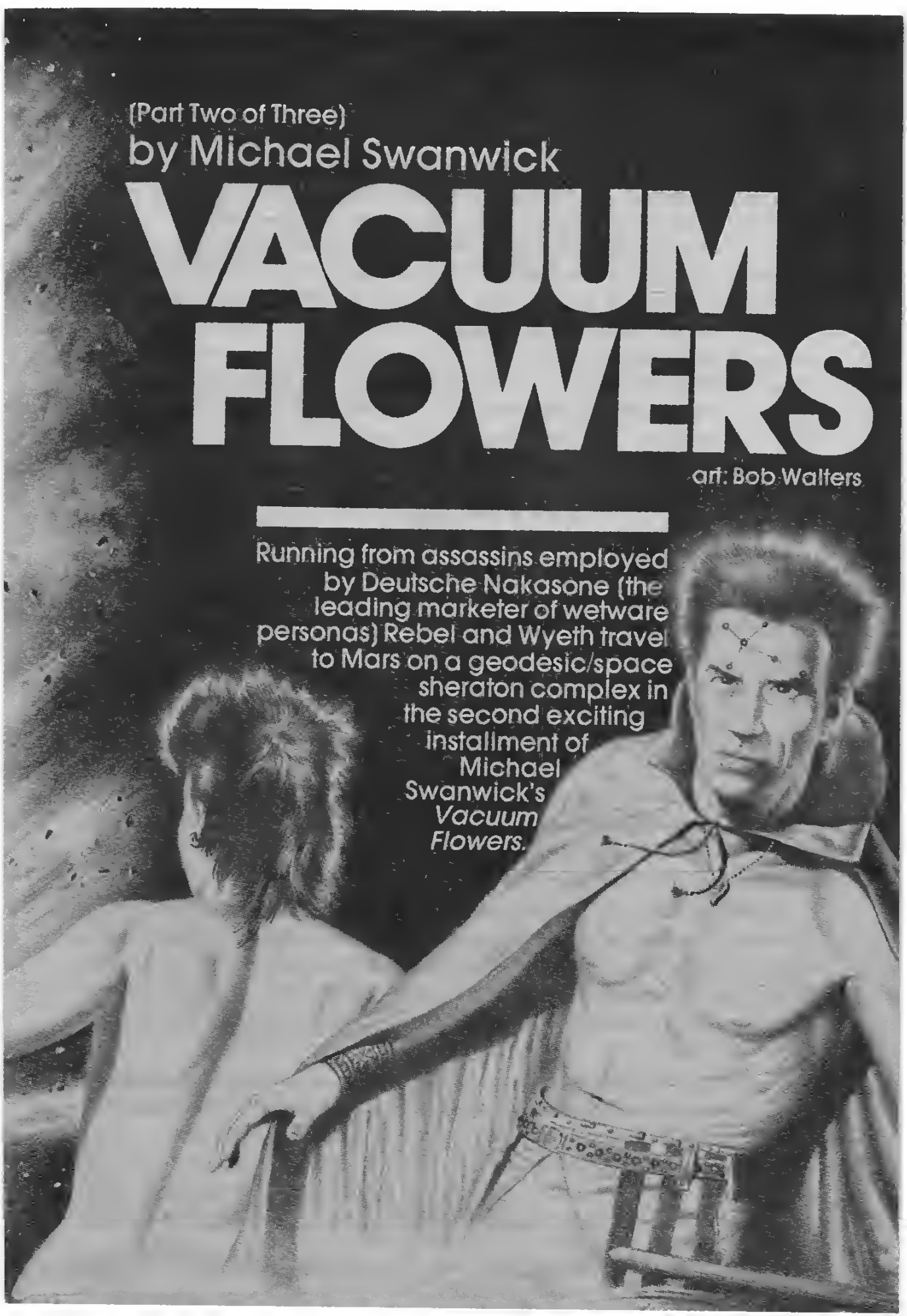
(Part Two of Three)

by Michael Swanwick

VACUUM FLOWERS

art: Bob Walters

Running from assassins employed by Deutsche Nakasone (the leading marketer of wetware personas) Rebel and Wyeth travel to Mars on a geodesic/space sheraton complex in the second exciting installment of Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers.*



Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark *finds herself in a hospital in New High Kamden, a cannister city within the orbital kluster about the asteroid Eros. Her memories are confused and contradictory, she is scheduled for major wetsurgery, and no one will answer her questions. Worse, her face and body are those of a stranger, and her med specs list her as "property of* **Deutsche Nakasone, GmbH."** *She escapes from full therapeutic paralysis, but is picked up by* **Jerzy Heisen,** *her wetsurgeon, who is a bit of an opportunist when off-program. He explains that she is "really"* **Eucrasia Walsh,** *a discontented persona bum who, while reviewing a newly-acquired personality for commercial potential, abruptly—and inexplicably—shorted out the programming device, destroying not only the sole hard copy of Rebel's persona, but the safe-copy of her own as well. Deutsche Nakasone has begun advertising the Mudlark persona for the mass market, intending to recover it from Rebel's mind and then—to avoid copyright entanglements—reprogram her into a crude approximation of Eucrasia.*

Heisen takes Rebel to **Snow,** *an otherworldly and anorexic technology freak half-lost in machine communion, who tries to buy a clean copy of her persona. Rebel refuses, but Snow helps her escape a sudden raid by Deutsche Nakasone's operatives anyway, sacrificing Heisen to cover her escape.*

Fleeing, Rebel loses her tenuous hold on her persona and in a fugue state calls on an old friend of Eucrasia's for help. **Wyeth** *is a "tetrad," a New Mind designed by Eucrasia and himself with four distinct personas—warrior, peace leader, mystic, and clown. He takes Rebel to Tank Fourteen, a zero-gravity slum in the shadow of the Londongrad cannister. There she meets* **Jonamon,** *an old burned-out rock prospector and religious fanatic who was cheated by Deutsche Nakasone in his youth, and* **Maxwell,** *a frivolous young man with whom she has a brief affair.*

In the tank town, she recovers more of her past, learning that the original Rebel entered Eros Kluster coldpacked onto a short lightsail, after a years-long voyage from a dyson world in the comet archipelagoes. It was a bold and dangerous stunt, performed for reasons Rebel can no longer remember. She died in transit, and Deutsche Nakasone picked up her persona as salvage.

Suddenly, the tank is raided. Jackboots swarm through the slums reprogramming tank towners into temporary police. Rebel narrowly escapes when Maxwell, programmed police, betrays her. Wyeth takes her to **King Wismon,** *who has a bootleg airlock. Wismon is monstrously fat and even more monstrously brilliant, a New Mind created with Wyeth's help sometime in the past, and gone rogue. Wyeth is able to escape his clutches with*

Rebel only because creators of New Minds usually insert a "kink" in their programming, and Wismon is unwilling to challenge his former mentor.

In a luxury business park in Londongrad, Wyeth negotiates with **Ginneh** *for the position of chief of security aboard a newly built sheraton destined for People's Mars. Guessing that it is no coincidence that Tank Fourteen is being sold as part of the same deal and that Wyeth is playing some deep game of which she has no inkling, Rebel leaves. She contacts a bioengineering crew led by* **Constance Frog Moorfields,** *on hire from a passing pod of comets. But they (a treehanger named* **Freeboy** *in particular) think her deluded, for she retains almost no memories of Tirnannog, her home dyson world. An associate of Snow, a man so lean and hairless as to be her twin, contacts Rebel to warn that Deutsche Nakasone has dedicated assassins to her, Jerzy Heisen among them. He also urges her to go to Earth, a proposal she finds bizarre and unlikely.*

Finally Rebel makes alliance with Wyeth, trading truth for truth. Wyeth, it seems, has declared a one-man war on Earth, and wants to use her as bait to trap Snow, her network, and their ultimate sponsor—the **Comprise of Earth.** *Over a century before, breakthroughs in wetprogramming and computer architecture allowed the creation of an Artificial Intelligence, which absorbed the minds of all humans living on-planet. Now all of Earth is a single collectivized intelligence—a group mind.*

The sheraton and several tank towns are enclosed within an enormous geodesic which is then filled with air and a miles-long bioconstructed orchid. A Comprisè of engineers accelerate the geodesic toward Mars, utilizing a **transit ring,** *a cryptic piece of more-than-human technology. Also present on the sheraton are Constance Frog Moorfields, who proves something of a burden to Wyeth, and her bioengineering crew. Jerzy Heisen nearly manages to kill Rebel, and escapes Wyeth's samurai.*

Against her better judgment, Rebel again has sex with Maxwell. As she is lying with him she realizes that she has fallen in love with Wyeth . . .

Chapter Six: ORCHID

When the sheraton's lights greenshifted from blue-tinged evening to yellowish dawn, Rebel kicked Maxwell out, and went to meet Wyeth. Trailed by a bodyguard of five samurai, they rode broomsticks into the geodesic. With her hair and cloak streaming behind, she felt like an Elizabethan lady riding to the hawks with her retinue, an illusion heightened by the scout cameras that soared at a distance, feeding information back to the guard. Except that the compressed air tanks chilled down as they were used, and after a while the saddle grew unpleasantly cold.

They rode by the outlying strands of orchid, where tangles of air roots

held obsidian globes of water larger than her head, and, slowing, headed into the plant. The stalks grew closer together as they flew into the epiphyte's labyrinthine folds. It had blossomed and the huge bioluminescent flowers shed gentle fairy light through the darkness. This was a vague light, not like the full bloom of luciferous algae back home, but more like the periodic night seasons when the algae died back. At last they came to a large clearing deep within the plant, and brought their broomsticks to a halt. "You won't consider martial arts programming?" Wyeth asked. "Very simple. It'd take maybe five minutes, with minimal personality change."

"No. I don't want anyone screwing with my mind."

He sighed. "Well, you've got to be able to defend yourself. So we'll have to reprogram you the old-fashioned way, with an instructor and lots of practice. Same results, just takes a lot more time and sweat. Treece." A thick little troll of a samurai slipped from his broomstick and floated beside it, one hand touching the saddle. He had a dark face and a froggish mouth. "Teach her."

Treece unlashed two singlesticks from his back and offered one to Rebel. She dismounted and accepted it. They both tied cloaks to saddles and kicked their vehicles away. "Good. Now take a whack at me."

Rebel eyed the swart little man, shrugged, and lashed out fast and hard, flinging back her opposing arm to control her drift. She was not at all surprised to see Treece slip out from under her blow—he was, after all, the instructor—but she was amazed when he slammed the back of her stick with his own, and the added energy set her tumbling end over end. "First lesson," Treece said. "You're going around and around one little point in your body, something like an axis. That's your center of mass."

"I know that!" Rebel said angrily, wishing Wyeth weren't watching her. She concentrated on not getting dizzy. "I grew up weightless."

"I grew up in gravity. Does me no good against somebody programmed judo." He let her spin. "Now the center of mass is very important. First off, you set somebody spinning around it, their effectiveness is lessened. Got all they can do to keep themselves oriented—their thrusts and parries won't be as crisp as they might be." He reached out with his stick and Rebel seized it, putting herself stable in relation to him again. "Second, you're going to want to remember to strike *at* the center of mass." He poked at her with the tip of his staff. "Try it yourself. Move around all you like. What's the one point of your body you can't move when you're afloat? It's your center of mass. It just stays there." He jabbed at her again. "Now. Move away from this."

All in a flash, Rebel slammed her singlestick forward, two-handing it against his weapon with a *crack* that made her palms smart. Reaction

threw her over his head, and on the way by she took a swipe at his skull. Treece brought his stick up for a parry and hook that brought them back to stable positions. "Absolutely right," he said. "When you're afloat, all serious movement is borrowed from your opponent."

The samurai all floated in a plane, honoring a consensus horizon. Treece wheeled upside down, leering at her. "So touching your opponent is both the source of opportunity and your greatest danger. Take my hand." Rebel reached out, and instantly he had seized her wrist, climbed her arm, and taken her throat between stick and forearm. "I could snap your neck like this. Once you've been touched, you're vulnerable. But you can't accomplish a damned thing without touching your opponent." He moved away, grinned sourly at her. "That's what makes it a skill."

Wyeth had been leaning back in his saddle, eyes closed, directing his pocket empire via a transceiver equipped with an adhesion disk. Now he opened his eyes and said, "That's as nice a paradigm for political maneuvering as I've ever heard."

Rebel started to respond and almost didn't hear her instructor's stick whistling toward her in time to parry. "No small talk!" Treece snapped. "We're done with talk now anyway. No more theory, no more gab, just dull, repetitive exercise. Rest of today, and every day until you get it right, is nothing but sweat."

A long time later, he looked disgusted and spat into the orchid. "Enough. Same time tomorrow."

Samurai brought up their broomsticks. Rebel felt exhausted, but pleasantly so. Aware of her every muscle. Luckily, Eucrasia had kept her body in good shape.

They rode to the edge of the orchid and stopped. Wyeth hitched his broom to an air root, and Rebel followed suit, while the guard moved away, expanding their patrol. Wyeth clambered along a thick trunk, inexpertly grabbing for handholds. Rebel followed more gracefully.

They came to the end of the plant, a break here as sudden and startling as when a climax forest gives way to grassland. Out in the darkness, distant stretches of the air plant were like streamers of luminous clouds. Alone and bright, the sheraton spun like a wheel. Its light was redder now, almost noontime orange. The silvery glimmerings about it were people flitting to and fro like mayflies.

Finally Wyeth said, "This is the first time I've ever had people working under me. I've always been something of a lone wolf."

Rebel looked at him, not sure what to say. At last she feebly joked, "More of a lone wolfpack, hey?"

"I guess."

More silence. Then, "What's it like?" Rebel asked. "Having four personas?"

"Well . . . when I'm not actually in use, I don't really do anything. I have a passive awareness of myself. I see what's going on. It's like there are four of us standing around a small stage, with a bright light on its center. We watch everything that happens, hear it all, feel it all, but we don't do a thing until we step into the light. When we're in the dark, we don't really much care. Sometimes all of us are in the light and—" His voice changed slightly. "Sometimes two of us are in the light, but one keeps his mouth shut. Another half hour monitoring and I expect to be spelled." His voice changed back again. "That was my warrior aspect. Right now he's directing security back in the sheraton. That frees me up to use the body."

"That's weird," Rebel said. "The way your voice changes. You don't really have to speak out loud to communicate with yourself, do you? I mean, you can think and the others will pick up on it?"

"No, I have to talk or at least subvocalize, because . . . well, thoughts are most of what a persona *is,* you see. They're the architecture, they define the shape and existence of a persona, where it starts and where it lets off. We can't share our thoughts directly—"

"—without breaking down the persona," Rebel finished for him. "Yeah, that's right, they'd all merge together, like breaking the membrane between twinned eggs."

"Eucrasia's training is really coming back to you."

Rebel looked away. "You don't have to sound so cheerful about it. It's like—I feel these memories closing in on me, crushing me. They're all *hers,* and none of them mine, and I can feel myself being affected by them, you know? I think they're changing me, making me more like her." She fought down a dark, helpless urge to cry. "Sometimes I think all those memories are going to rise up and drown me."

Wyeth touched her arm. "Your persona is only a mask," he said in his pattern-maker voice. "Ultimately it's not important. *You*—your being, your self—are right *here,* in the compass of your skull and body." Rebel shivered again under his touch, and she turned to him. Then, it was like the singlestick exercise of climbing your opponent's arm—it happened all in a furious instant, too fast for thought. Wyeth's arms crushed her to his body, and they were kissing each other. She wanted him so desperately it was hard to believe that he had reached for her first.

"Come on." Wyeth drew her back into the orchid, into a space that was dark and sheltered. He slid her cloak from her, and set it to the side. His hands moved down her body, rolled away her *cache-sexe.* He buried his face in the side of her neck.

"Wait," Rebel said. "I want the big guy."

He looked at her questioningly.

"Your warrior aspect. I want to make love to you while you're being the warrior."

Later, Rebel went out riding with the fool. They laughed and joked as they went no place in particular. "You're going to have to give up your irrational prejudice against wetprogramming," Wyeth said, smiling. "It's useful stuff. If I didn't have another persona running the sheraton, I couldn't be out here now, gallivanting about with you."

They rode on and came to a carnival.

It was located where the orchid grew closest to the tanks. One long vine, in fact, had been disentangled and tied to an airlock; people traveled along it, following the holiday music to where a clearing had been chopped inside the plant.

From outside, the carnival looked like a ramshackle collection of huts and frames caught in the tangled growth. Within, it was bright with flowers and strings of paper lanterns. Tank towners in cloaks as garish as jungle moths flitted to and fro. Lengths of flash-dried vine had been lashed together to make dueling cages, booths for astrologers and luck-changers, lovers' mazes, gambling wheels, and huckster tables. Artisans were painting panels for a centrifuge ride, conjuring up kings, bulls, starships, and reapers.

A singlestick duel was in progress by the main gate. The samurai glanced at it with interest as they entered.

"Look!" Wyeth drew Rebel into a booth where fairgoers threw water-balls at a distant bozo. "Give me three!" He flung the first with too much force, and it broke into tiny drops that splattered past the clown like rain. The bozo jeered, and Wyeth threw again. This time the ball exploded into a thousand spherelets in the bozo's face."Ah, that felt good!"

When the barker floated him the last waterball, Wyeth winked at the bozo and smashed it into his own face. Nearby fairgoers laughed in astonishment. Away from the paper lanterns, their eyes were shadowy, and their faces pale masks.

They wandered past simple games of rigged chance to hucksters selling jams and candies, carved wooden astronauts, bright straw dolls, and dark barrel men. "Right here!" a barker cried. "Yes, yes, yes!" Rebel bought a sugar skull and bit into it. Red jelly oozed from one eye socket. She stared at it in dismay, then laughed. She was considering some silver bells with toe-ribbons when she was struck with sudden unease. Looking up, she saw Wyeth holding a luminous apple the size of a cherry tomato.

"Seven hours?" Wyeth said. "Seven hours Kluster for an apple?"

The huckster was a little man with spidery arms and legs, a lopsided grin, and a crazy look to his dark eyes. He sang:

"Awake, arise, pull out your eyes,

And hear what time of day.
And when you have done, pull out your tongue
And see what you can say!"

Then, speaking to Wyeth, "Ah, but the shyapple is no ordinary fruit, no, it has a worm at its heart."

"What does the worm do?"

"Why it eats, sir. It eats and excretes, until it drowns in its own liquor." He plucked the apple from Wyeth's fingers. "You must swallow it whole: core, pips, and aye. Like thus.

"What did I dream? I do not know;
The fragments fly like chaff.
Yet strange my mind was tickled so
I cannot help but laugh."

Then, speaking again, "My name is Billy Bejesus and I live in a tree. If I'm not there yet, why then that must be me." He tumblesaulted over in the air, kicking his heels.

Appalled and intrigued, Wyeth turned to Rebel. "Can you make any sense of this madman's ranting?"

"Don't touch those things! Don't you know a shyapple when you see one?" Big-eyed, Wyeth shook his head. "They're mind alterers. By the sound of it, this lot is just directed hallucinogens, but a shyapple can be prepared to do almost anything—to give you a skill, to make you mad, to bring you sanity. Some are prepared so they'll negate themselves after a few hours, and others are . . . permanent. You wouldn't want to put one in your mouth without knowing what it does first."

"Really? Chemical wetprogramming?" Wyeth rubbed a fingertip over the bright skin, held it to his nose and sniffed gingerly. "How does it work?"

"Well, the shyapple is just a matrix. It's the worm that's altered according to what effects are desired. It's. . . . injected with a virus that . . . when the shyapple's center liquifies, the virus undergoes explosive growth and . . ." She faltered to a stop. "No. It's gone now. I used to know, but it's all gone." And yet it was—she sensed—vitally important in some way.

"I never heard of them before." Wyeth held a shyapple to his eyes, admiring the translucent skin, the candy-red shimmer, its full to bursting juiciness. "Where did they come from, I wonder? Why did they show up here all of a sudden?"

Rebel shook her head helplessly.

"You've got what? Three crates there?" Billy Bejesus's grin was luminescent. "I'll take them all. Treece. Arrange the details and see that these things are taken back to the sheraton."

They floated on. Rebel lingered at a jewelry display, examining a tray

of religious pins: stars, crosses, swastikas, and the like. She bought a white scallop shell and pinned it to the collar of her cloak. "Now I can wipe off this face paint," she said. "People will assume I'm some sort of religious fanatic." Oddly enough, her sense of unease was stronger than ever.

"Good thinking. Though if I were you I'd find out what your pin stands for. Might save you an embarrassing conversation somewhere down the line."

They were floating hand in hand before an enormous mesh sphere, watching the cockfights, when Wyeth said in his leader voice, "Crap. Come on. We've got to get back to the sheraton." He tugged Rebel toward the gate. Their bodyguard materialized around them.

"What's the trouble?" Rebel asked.

"Constance is talking with the Comprise."

All the way back to the sheraton, Rebel'd had the uneasy feeling that someone was following her, a shadowy presence flitting through the leaves and vines that was never there when she looked back over her shoulder, but returned the instant she looked away. Here in the bright-lit rooms of the complex, that sense faded, but did not go entirely away. There was somebody outside coming for her.

"Heisen's body was never found," Wyeth said when she mentioned this to him. "He very well co*uld* be coming for you. That's half the reason I've assigned you a permanent guard."

"What's the other half?"

"We're going in to deal with them now." He slipped a bracelet from his wrist, one of a pair of thick ivory bands lined with silver. "Here. Put this on. It monitors the electromagnetic spectrum."

Samurai stepped aside as Wyeth slammed through the doors to the center ring's main conference room. There, under a holographic sky, Constance sat on the edge of a red lacquered bridge. She was dabbing her feet in the goldfish stream. Several Comprise stood by, listening to her talk. Scattered among the topiary bushes were her team with the tools of their trade—fermenters, chimeric sequence splicers, microbeal bioreactors, and the like—demonstrating lab techniques while Comprise in identical coveralls clustered about them, like patches of orange mist. Wyeth's face hardened into granite slabs.

"All right, Moorfields!"

Constance leaped to her feet. "Oh!" She blinked. "You startled me, Mr. Wyeth."

"I'll do worse than that to you." Wyeth glowered at her from the bank. "Just what do you think you're doing? Why have you moved your lab and people from the third ring?"

"Well, I had to. I wanted to chat with the Comprise, and I was told there was some silly rule against their leaving the central ring."

Some hundred Comprise dotted the room. Several drifted over, into a loose semicircle about Wyeth and Rebel, studying them gravely but saying nothing. "Clear the treehangers out," Wyeth ordered. Samurai moved in and started escorting the bioengineers away. "Have two people programmed legal, one Londongrad and one People's Mars, and send them here." To Constance, "You'll find that Kluster law is extremely legalistic, and People's law is informal and rational. Between them, I expect that if you step out of line again, I can hang you for treason."

"Treason! Surely you're joking."

"I am very serious."

Constance shook her head, clasped her hands, let them fall. "But we were just exchanging scientific information."

"Oh? What information did they give you?"

"We were on the preliminaries, just swapping basics. Talking shop. You know."

"I know very well." Wyeth's hands were clenched and white. "Use your head! Your gang was swapping detailed bioscientific chitchat with a team of Comprise that is ostensibly here as engineers and physicists. How did they know the jargon? How did they happen to know enough of the biosciences to understand what you were talking about?"

"Well, Earth is after all a planet. They have the largest set of interlocking ecologies in the Inner System, so they must use . . ."

Embarrassed, Rebel shifted her gaze out the window wall. She saw tiny motes of light sifting through the orchid; people were astir out there. Doubtless the tanks were emptying out as people moved into the plant. But looking away couldn't keep her from overhearing the argument.

"That's nonsense! They know because they're spies, that's why. Before they left Earth they were systematically crammed with the basics of every corner of science, in the hope they'd stumble across something useful. Ms. Moorfields, look at them! They are not human, they're not friendly, and they're not altruistic. They'll take whatever technology you've got and then use it against your own race. You're selling humanity down the tubes—and for what?"

Unexpectedly, a Comprise said, "She wants the technology to build a transit ring."

Constance started. "I didn't tell them that!"

"The Comprise is very quick on the uptake," Wyeth said sardonically. He asked the Comprise, "Why did she want that information?"

"The desire for private gain is a common failing of individual intelligence."

"That's not it at all!" Constance cried. "It would open up the stars.

Can't you see?" She appealed directly to Wyeth. "It could be used to accelerate comets beyond the Oort Cloud, toward the nearer stars. The closest could be reached within the span of one long lifetime—they gave me the figures! Imagine thousands of dyson worlds drifting from star to star. Expanding into the universe. Imagine an age of exploration and discovery." Her voice was fervent, almost devout, and Rebel found herself responding to it as she might to a farbranch revivalist prophet. "Imagine mankind finally freed from the cradle of the sun, and wandering the starry galaxies in search of . . . I don't know. Truth, maybe? Destiny! All the final answers!"

Before Wyeth could reply, the Comprise said. "Do not trouble yourself, Boss Wyeth. She has nothing we desire."

"That's not true. You told me . . ." But the Comprise had wandered off. Almost pleading, she said, "They told me they were interested in the mind arts. We know a great deal about them."

"You yourself?" Wyeth asked. "One of your people?"

"Well, no. It's all new technology. The breakthroughs are being made, but the skills aren't widespread yet."

"And yet you're all biologists. Isn't it a coincidence then that a Comprise of engineers are up on the mind arts, while your own people know zilch? I'd say you've just proven that your friends here are indeed spies." Wyeth casually touched a bracelet on his wrist, and crooked an eyebrow at Rebel. She touched the bracelet he had given her.

The world was transformed. Electricity glowed white from wires hidden in the walls. Heat shimmered green. Cobalt particles sleeted through the room, cosmic radiation to which matter was an insubstantial as a dream. A red haze of radiocommunication surrounded the now-green figures of the Comprise, and laser-crisp directional beams reached from individual to individual, shifting as thoughts were divided and routed for processing. Rebel blinked, and it all disappeared for an instant. She looked down at the bracelet and saw the blazing circuits of a holographic projector. One of Wyeth's spy devices.

"Mr. Wyeth, you are being disgusting." Constance turned away.

"Don't be like that," Wyeth said in his whimsical voice. "Here, have an apple. Nice and crunchy." He placed something in her hand.

"An apple?" Constance looked down at the shyapple and dropped it, horrified. "Where did that come from?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. This is an example of your mind art biotechnology, isn't it?"

"Yes, but . . ." She tightened her lips. "Hook me into your intercom system." One of the Comprise stepped forward and, stooping, reached for the fallen shyapple. Wyeth stepped on the woman's hand, hard, and she jerked it back.

"We were curious," the Comprise said mildly. Several new lines of interaction connected with her.

"So what?" Wyeth gestured to the samurai. "Keep the Comprise on their side of the stream. And open up a channel for Ms. Moorfields."

A moment later, Freeboy's image appeared, and Constance shook the shyapple at him. "Freeboy, you're the only one who's been working with directed viruses. Is this your doing?"

"Aw, hell," Freeboy said. "It's just pocket money."

"You never mentioned this skill to me."

"It's not a skill. It's only cookbook stuff. I got the recipe from a wizard in Green City, when I was in Tirnannog." Constance's face was cold and white. The boy spread his hands, his shoulders hunching slightly. "Hey, it's only a Billy Bejesus—eight hours looniness, and it deprograms itself. It's not like I was hurting anybody. I didn't do anything wrong."

"Like hell you didn't, young man."

While the young treehanger was being dressed down, Rebel saw an odd thing: The Comprise, who had been moving about seemingly randomly, had all simultaneously arrived at the water's edge. The samurai guarding them shifted uneasily. They stared across the water, orange faces blank, eyes unblinking. The electromagnetic interactions increased, lines blinking on and off like laser strobes. For a long moment, no one moved.

Then the Comprise jumped, individual components running furiously to one side or the other, forming clusters and gaps. Twenty charged across the wooden bridge. The samurai braced themselves to receive the charge.

In that instant's confusion, a small orange figure darted across the stream. The guards' eyes had been drawn one way and another, and he leaped through a blind spot. All in a flash, he was at Constance's side, reached up and snatched the shyapple from her hands. Before anyone could react, he was back among the Comprise. "That was a *child!*" Rebel said.

"Catch him!" Wyeth commanded, and three samurai leaped the stream. As they converged on the child, he crammed the fruit in his mouth and swallowed. One snatched him up and carried him back, the others defending. But the Comprise offered no resistance. They turned away, again as aimless as so many cattle. Still, red interaction lines connected the boy directly to half the Comprise in the room.

"Too late," Wyeth said when the samurai placed the boy before him. "He's already swallowed it."

"But this is a child," Rebel repeated.

"This is the body of a child. Comprise engineering teams always include a few children for tasks where a bigger body would just be in the way."

"But that's awful."

"I agree." Wyeth smiled at Constance. "How about you? Still feel that there's no crime in five billion human minds with only one single identity among them?"

"We must be careful not to anthropomorphize," Constance said weakly. She looked pale.

"Very well put." Wyeth turned to the child Comprise. "Why did you do it?"

"We were curious," the boy said. "We wished to know whether this new technology might prove useful to us. In that sense—in that we are always eager for new information, new ideas, new directions of thought—we are indeed the spies you accuse us of being. But only in that one sense of being true to our nature."

"You see?" Constance said.

"More importantly, it distresses us to be separated from the true Comprise." Rebel couldn't see the child's face now for the blaze of red interaction lines touching the skin over his buried rectenna, but his voice was bland. "There are only five hundred Comprise in this structure—and we are used to the mental stimulation of billions. Restricted as we are, any new challenges are taken up eagerly." A pause. "You might say that we were bored."

Wyeth turned to Freeboy's image. "How long does your drug take to hit?"

Freeboy shrugged. "Not long. A minute or two. There are receptor enhancers in the shyapple matrix. Tell you, though, maybe this isn't really a good idea. Those apples are adult dosages. I don't know what they'll do to a kid. This one looks like he has low body mass."

Constance reached for the boy, and a samurai batted her hand away. "But there's still time. If I stick a finger down his throat . . ."

"Now, now," Wyeth chided. "Mustn't anthropomorphize. Let's just wait and see. This might be interesting."

The boy stood still between his guard of samurai. Suddenly he stiffened. His eyes opened wide. "Oh," he said. One hand rose before his face and writhed spasmodically. "I think—"

The child screamed.

The lawyers arrived while the Comprise were still thrashing on the ground. Four samurai held the boy's limbs, and Constance knelt beside him. The directional beams flicked on and off, lashing blindly through the air like the frenzied legs and antennae of a dying insect. Then, all radio contact with the drugged child finally severed, the other Comprise slowly got to their feet, a hundred individual expressions of collective horror on their faces.

"I wonder why it worked so well?" Wyeth murmured thoughtfully to

himselves. "They've got defenses against intrusive wetprogramming. This must be something new. This must be an entirely different approach."

"Hold still, dear. If I can get you to throw up, you'll feel better," Constance said.

The boy twisted his head away from her. "I," he said. "I saw the moon I saw a tree I saw the moon caught in a tree I saw a tree caught in the moon." His eyes were wide as saucers; they quivered slightly in time to some inner pulse.

"I saw a peacock with a fiery tail,
I saw a blazing comet drop down hail,
I saw a cloud—"

"Take him to the surgery," Wyeth ordered. "Do what you can to ease his discomfort, but get the radio implants inside him deactivated before he regains his senses. I don't want him reconnecting with the Comprise."

"You can't do that," Constance objected. "He's a part of the Comprise. That's where he belongs."

"Well?" Wyeth asked the lawyers. "Can I do that or not?"

The lawyer in yellowface chewed his lower lip. "It's a difficult point."

"If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck," the lawyer in purple said, "then it's a duck. This individual looks human, and uses the first-person singular. Therefore he's human, not Comprise."

"Thank you," Wyeth said. He gestured at Freeboy's image. "This joker's been dealing dangerous hallucinogens out in the orchid. What can I get him for?"

"Nothing," the purple lawyer said. "There's no law against giving people the opportunity to hurt themselves."

"We-ell now, there is the question of presumed societal consent," Yellow said. "Consensus-altering drugs would come under the foreseeable cultural change clauses of—"

"Good," Wyeth said. "I sentence you to status of programmed informant for the duration of transit. Stay where you are. The programmers will come for you." Freeboy looked stricken. "You'll be attached to Moorfields here. Observe her, and report to me at this hour of every day." He turned to Rebel and offered his arm. "I think we've done enough, don't you? Shall we go?"

That night, Rebel fell asleep after making love, and dreamed that she was walking the empty corridors of some ancient manor. It was cold and there was the scent of lilacs in the air. A breeze stirred her hair, passed chill hands over her thighs and abdomen. She came face to face with an ornate Victorian mirror. The gravity was half again Greenwich normal,

pulling down her flesh, making her face look old and gaunt. She wonderingly reached out a hand to the mirror.

Her reflection's hand broke through the liquid surface of the mirror and seized her wrist.

Rebel tried to pull away, but the grip was unbreakable. Long red nails dug painfully into her flesh. In the mirror Eucrasia showed her teeth in a smile. She was a fat-breasted little woman, but there was muscle under that smooth brown skin. "Don't go away, dearest. We have so much to talk about."

"We have nothing to talk about!" Rebel's panicked words bounced from the walls, and echoed down to nothing.

Eucrasia pushed her face against the mirror's surface, the glass bulged out by nose and lips but held together by surface tension. Silver highlights played over her skin. "Ah, but we do. My memories are going to overwhelm you if you don't do something about them." Behind her was a white room, a surgery, with trays of chromed instruments. "Come closer, sweet love."

She yanked Rebel forward, right up against the mirror. Their nipples touched, kissed at the surface. "I want to help you," Eucrasia whispered. "Look at me." For the first time, Rebel looked into the woman's eyes. There was nothing in the sockets but an empty space where the eyes should have been. She could see through them to the back of Eucrasia's skull. "You see? I have no self. No desires. How can I intend you harm?"

"I don't know." Rebel began to cry. "Let me go."

"There are only two ways you can survive. The first is to have me recreated as a secondary persona. You'd be like Wyeth, then. You'd have to share your life, but the memories would be shunted over to the Eucrasia persona. You could remain intact." The reflection shifted to one side, and Rebel was forced to move with it. "The second alternative is to make a complete recording of your persona. Then you could reprogram yourself every few weeks. This is less desirable, because it precludes any chance of personal growth." Their stomachs touched now. Eucrasia placed her lips on Rebel's. "Well?" she asked. "Which will it be?"

"Neither!"

The reflection reached out and yanked Rebel's head into the mirror. Quicksilver closed about her. It was like being underwater, and Rebel couldn't breathe. "Then your personality will dissolve," Eucrasia said. "Slowly at first, and then more quickly. You'll be gone within a month."

Rebel choked, and awoke.

"Wake up," Wyeth said. He was holding her. "You're having a nightmare." Then, seeing her eyes open, "It was only a dream."

"Jesus," Rebel said. She buried her face in his chest and cried.

When she finally stopped, Wyeth released her and she sat up. She

looked about dazedly. Wyeth had apparently been up for some time, thinking his own thoughts, for the walls had been turned on. A starscape, piped in from outside, glowed in the night. "Look," Wyeth said. He pointed to a fuzzy patch almost overhead. "That's Eros Kluster. The asteroid is invisible from here, and what we're seeing is the attenusphere—the waste gases from the factories and refineries, the oxygen lost whenever an airlock opens, fine matter from reaction jets. It surrounds the Kluster, and the solar wind ionizes it, like the gas in a comet's tail. Assuming the comet is unplanted, of course." He pointed out more smudges, all in the plane of the ecliptic. "There's Pallas Kluster, Ceres Kluster, Juno Kluster, Vesta—" He sang off the names in a gentle litany. "Civilization is spreading. Someday there'll be major developments everywhere in the asteroid belts. Those hazy patches will link then, into one enormous smoke ring around the sun. That would be something to see, hey?"

"Yes," Rebel said in a little voice.

"Feel up to talking about it yet?"

So she told him her dream. When she was done, Wyeth said, "Well, there's your mysterious pursuer." She frowned. "Back in the orchid, you thought someone was following you? Eucrasia. The memories are rising up, and you're projecting them into the exterior world."

"That may be so," Rebel said. "But knowing it doesn't do me any good."

"You really have only two choices," Wyeth said softly. "Your dream spelled them out for you. You were a topnotch wetprogrammer, and your diagnosis is sound. Listen, you want my advice? Take Eucrasia in with you. I knew her, she's not such a bad sort. You can live with her."

"I won't do it," Rebel said. "I won't let anyone touch my mind, I—I just won't, is all."

Wyeth turned away. There was tension in the muscles of his back. After a very long time, Rebel touched his shoulder and he turned back abruptly, almost violently. "Why are you being so stubborn?" he cried. "*Why?*"

"I don't know why," Rebel admitted. "It's just the way I am, I guess."

Chapter Seven: BILLY DEFECTOR

Rebel woke to an empty bed. She breakfasted and went in search of Wyeth. A pierrot directed her through a rock garden and around a kitchen, and a samurai sent her past the orgy pits and down a ramp. She came to a bottom ring room where three holographic wetware diagrams spun slowly in the air. Rebel saw that they were morphs of the same personality. From the sickliness of the main branches and twisted

distribution of the lesser limbs, it was a very badly damaged persona indeed.

The Comprise child sat beneath the rotating green spheres. He hadn't slept. His face was puffy, his eyes glazed. His orange skin was blotchy with grey patches. "What's your name?" Wyeth asked. "Do you have a name?"

The boy shook his head. "I—uh, what?" Wyeth repeated the question, and without raising his eyes, the child said, "B-Billy. Billy B-Be . . ." His voice stuttered to a halt.

Wyeth grinned and tugged the child's braid. "We'll call you Billy Defector, okay? Because you've come over to our side, you're going to be human now. Would you like that?"

"He's not going to thank you for doing this to him."

"Shut up, Constance. Now, Billy, do you remember being a part of the Comprise? Do you remember what it was like?"

Billy's head jerked up, eyes fearful. His hands twisted in his lap. Then he looked down again, and mumbled, "I—yes."

"Good. Do you remember the briefing you got before coming here?" Billy said nothing. "Do you remember your instructions?"

Samurai parted for Rebel and she slipped into the room. Her guard stayed outside. Freeboy glanced at her quickly from one corner, then away. His lips were thin, and he stared rigidly, unblinking, at Constance. Rebel walked over to him and whispered, "What happened to the kid's face?"

"What? The blotches? We injected a phage under the skin to neutralize his dye; it takes a few days to flush it out of the system. Itches some, too. But since he's not Comprise anymore, your boss doesn't want him marked as one."

"I thought your apple was supposed to deprogram itself."

Freeboy curled his lip. Without looking at her he said pedantically, "For a normal psyche, a Billy Bejesus is a harmless, ego-intensive shyapple that leaves nothing behind but memories. But the Comprise have only embryonic egos—even the memory of having a strong personal identity is damaging to them. Changes the creatures drastically."

"Shock imprint syndrome," Rebel said, Eucrasia's memories coming to her effortlessly. "Yes, of course."

At the sound of her voice, Wyeth turned. "Sunshine! Just the person I wanted to see. It seems you and I are the closest things to competent wetprogrammers we have." He snapped open a thin white case and ran a finger down one line of wetwafers. Hundreds of codified character traits, skills, compulsions and professions rippled under his touch. "I'd expected to just program up some experts. But it seems the regulations have changed in the last few years. Wetprogramming is very tightly controlled

now. Beautiful, hey? None of the other professions are protected like that."

Without any sense of transition, Rebel was at the case. Her hands floated down over lines of joys, fears, sorrows, and ecstasies with unhesitating sureness, and teased out a manual skills program. It was for vacuum casting ceramics as thin and delicate as soap bubbles. She slid it into an analyzer, tilting back her head to see its effect on the diagram overhead. The r-branch was straightened, but a self-destructive paradigm opened up near the midsection of the n-branch.

The rift was easily filled by altering the sensorium distribution and heightening religious susceptibility. Rebel eased two more wafers into the analyzer, adjusted tone readings, and edited out a few irrelevancies. This strengthened the n-branch, but kinked the l-branch at its first major split, so she replaced the ceramics wafer with a woodworking package. Little by little, the template began to shape up.

This was the great challenge, to find the health hidden within a damaged psyche, and to assemble the program that would restore it. She lost herself in the work. Some time later—minutes? hours?—she looked up again, and found the interrogation was still going on. Not much progress had been made.

"Billy, do you remember being Earth? Do you remember what it was like?"

"It was like—" The child stopped and swallowed. "Nothing happened. It was warm. No thoughts. Many thoughts. Nothing was real."

"What kind of thoughts?"

Billy closed his eyes for a long moment. Then, in a rapid monotone, he said, "Rotate grating six raise two and rotate again reroute quote the Comprise agree in principle but with reservations unquote raise the vial of eagle's blood reroute using allens wrench adjust the potentiometer to the red mark reroute ship to Sanfrisco marked green code green reroute injecting kerosine between vascular stations seventeen and twelve reroute railroad bedding excavation—"

"Stop!"

Billy obeyed.

"What's the problem?" Rebel asked.

Wyeth looked disgusted. "It's all garbage. Bits and pieces jumbled together at random. I'm not going to learn anything from this child because he never knew anything. He never thought a complete thought through in his life. He just processed a constant flow of babble."

Now Constance folded her arms, glaring at Wyeth. "He's used to being a part of oceanic thought. You've ripped him out of his natural environment. Of course you can't get any sense out of him—look at him! He's

been damaged. Being remade in the mold of a human individual is a major devolutionary step for him."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is. God damn that superior smile, it is! This is the way that life evolves, from simple to complex. We're all on an evolutionary voyage from the small and uncomplicated to the macrocosmic. From one-celled plants to comet oaks. From amoebae through fish to apes. From simple sensation through sentience, intelligence, and then macrointelligence. Can't you see the progression? All of life evolves toward Godhead."

"A very pretty theory, but with all due respect, it's full of shit."

The boy was sweating. Constance wiped his brow. He began breathing heavily, and she dabbed a fluid on his throat. As it sank through the skin, his breathing eased. "You—"

Movement at the door. "Sir?" Two samurai escorted in a tall Comprise. "This one said he had to talk with you personally."

"You have one of our number," the Comprise said. "Return him."

Wyeth shifted slightly, put his hand on the child's shoulder. Looking at Constance, he said, "Billy? Do you want to return?"

Billy trembled. His eyes darted here, there, everywhere but toward the Comprise. His body twisted away spasmodically. "In his condition, he can't possibly give informed—" Constance began.

"Why?" Rebel asked the Comprise. "I mean, he can't be much use to you in his condition. What do you want him for?"

"Experimentation. Dissection."

Constance opened her mouth, shut it again. The Comprise spoke into the sudden silence. "We also require a good analytical laboratory, a surgery, and a supply of the drug administered to us. We will need to take a large number of tissue samples. The analytical equipment should be suitable for a comprehensive mapping of chemical trace effects in the brain. Earth will of course pay for your trouble."

"The hell you say." Wyeth's face was hard.

Before the Comprise could respond, Billy bent forward, covering his head with frantic hands, and began to cry. Gingerly, Rebel sat beside him, put an arm around his shoulders. He turned, throwing himself at her, and buried his head between her shoulder and neck. Small hands clutched at her painfully. "We are not sure what you mean by that," the Comprise said.

"Let me spell it out for you," Wyeth said. "First, we like the boy, and we're going to keep him. Second, our resources are limited, and we do not have the laboratory equipment to spare, no matter what price you're willing to pay. And third—"

He turned to a nearby samurai. "Those crates of shyapples I had brought here? Destroy them all."

The floor exploded upward.

"Holy shit!" Freeboy cried, and then fell backwards as something fast glanced off the side of his head. The room was suddenly full of black, acrid smoke. A cable ripped free from the floor, stiffened with voltage, and fell forward, like a huge snake striking. Sparks skittered across the floor. Wyeth flung out an arm to point at Rebel and Billy. "Treece!" he shouted. "Get them out of here!"

Orange figures boiled up from the hole.

The Comprise child was heavy. Treece hustled them through long corridors while electrical equipment hissed and erupted about them. All the lights went out. "What's happening?" Rebel cried. The boy's small hands still clutched at her. He kept his face buried in her shoulder.

"Power outage. Wyeth's crashed the computers. It'll be on in a minute."

Something exploded up ahead. There was a chemical stink in the air. "No, I mean—"

Treece grinned thuggishly. "Oh, you mean in *general*. The Comprise have taken over our computer systems. Nothing to worry about. We were waiting for this." The lights went back on. In the hall behind them, a wall collapsed, and the lights blacked out again. In the dark, a squad of samurai trotted by.

"What?"

"Turn right here." A sudden wind boomed down the hall, and Rebel almost lost her footing. "The Comprise will always suborn a computer system. It's second nature to them. But our systems are built to be crashed. We've got manual cut-offs through the sheraton. We can crash the system and rebuild it as many times as they can take it over."

They stepped into an orangery with a stormy holographic sky. While Treece rummaged through an adjacent storeroom, Rebel stood dully looking at the orrery in the center of the room. Marigolds had been planted at its base. The samurai emerged with two broomsticks and thrust one at Rebel. He also carried a rifle and two singlesticks, one of which he also gave Rebel. "Feel like you can handle the kid?"

"I feel like a marsupial." The way Billy was clutching her, he wasn't likely to come loose. She climbed into her saddle. "Let's go."

Treece raised his rifle and blew out the window.

They exploded out into darkness. Almost immediately limpet cameras swooped down on them from all directions. "Son of a bitch!" Treece screamed, bringing up the rifle. He burst all but two of the cameras before the remotes could reach them. One dove for his face, and he swung the rifle around like a club to smash into its complexly-lensed front. Fragments of camera and gun went flying.

The last camera came at Rebel. She slashed with her singlestick, and almost lost her seat. The camera bobbed under her swing, and then there was an instant's darkness as the sheraton's computers were crashed yet again. The wheel's lights came back on, and before the Comprise systems could reprogram the camera its momentum carried it through a window. It crashed to the floor, buzzing and crippled. Then window, room, and all swung away.

"Go!" Treece shouted, and Rebel got her hands back on the broomstick and kicked the jet nozzles wide open.

They screamed away. "Where are we going?" she yelled over her shoulder.

Treece brought his broomstick up alongside hers. Now that they were out of danger, he was impassive again. "Anywhere you like, so long as it's not the sheraton. Or the tank towns. Security is a problem there. This is a rigged fight, even if the Comprise doesn't know it yet. All we have to do is lay low for a few hours, and it'll be safe to go back home."

They cruised the orchid's edge, Rebel slowly killing speed with short bursts of retro, until they were moving at a crawl. Up ahead, Rebel saw a white rag tied to a stalk. "Look there. What's that for, do you think?"

Treece shrugged.

Coming to a stop, Rebel peered into the tangles of orchid. She saw another white rag tied further in. Between rags, several stalks looked frayed, as if they had served as common kickstops. The ghost of a memory from her life in Tirnannog tugged at her. "It's a path. Somebody lives in there." She angled her broomstick inward. The boy had not spoken since their flight had begun. She put a hand on the top of his head. It was warm, almost fevered; she imagined she could feel the interplay of emotions within. His braid stuck straight out. She held it against his skull, and wondered how old he was. Seven? Nine? Not that it mattered. "How are you doing, Billy?"

The boy shook his head.

They drifted deeper into the orchid, the light dimming as blossoms grew rarer. Roots and stalks grew thicker here, and more tangled. Rebel had to dismount. She put Billy into the saddle, and towed the broomstick behind her. He peered about silently. She tugged the broomstick deeper into the vines, finding handholds and grabspots, and always following the rags. It was almost a tunnel now, an irregular passage created by training back selected vines. Treece followed after.

"This would be the perfect spot for an ambush," he said.

A woman laughed. Not a friendly laugh. "Too true," she said from the gloom. "So state your business. What do you want with the village? You mean us harm or not?"

Treece gestured Rebel back, then put his hands on his hips. "You see this woman, this child? You try to hurt them—you die. Anybody else tries to hurt them dies too." Silence. "But so long as you don't hurt them, we intend no evil. We're only looking for someplace to spend a few quiet hours. If you let us pass, we'll go on. Otherwise, we'll turn back now."

A woman floated forward, materializing from gloom and tangled root. She held a rifle. "Fair enough," she said. "Pass. Just remember, there's only the one path, and you have to come by me again on your way out. Behave yourselves."

She was gone.

The village was a handful of stick huts around a central clearing, something like a larger version of the courts in Tank Fourteen. But the huts here were loosely woven frames with wide stretches of orchid between, like a scatter of wicker boxes discarded in the weeds. As they paused at the edge of the clearing, several people peered from their huts with frank curiosity.

Rebel's broomstick bobbed, and she turned to see Billy slip from the saddle. He darted to a hut where a man sat cross-legged in the doorway, a small pot of luminous ink before him. He had a scholar's facepaint, and was carefully drawing a long line on a rectangle of parchment.

The child approached the drawing slowly, as if hypnotized, the long, glowing line doubly reflected in his unblinking eyes.

The scholar raised his head. Shadows pooled under his brows. "You like it?" He lifted the brush from the end of the line, and dipped it into the inkpot. "It's a pun." With quick dabs he drew an ideogram on a leaf, held it up for inspection. "You see that? That's my name—Ma. It means horse. My name is Ma Fu-ya. What's yours?"

"Billy," the child answered without hesitation.

"Well, Billy, you see this line I just drew? I want you to imagine that it's the same as this line here"—the brush touched one line of the leaf ideogram—"only stretched long and warped out of shape. You see? Then this next line runs along one foreleg." Quickly, surely, he drew the other lines, and together they made a horse. "You see?"

The child laughed and clapped his hands.

"He seems to like you," Rebel said.

The scholar laid his brush in the air before him. "He's a nice kid. Welcome to our village. We haven't gotten around to naming it. If you're staying, I advise you not to build too far from the clearing; one man did that already, and lost his hut before he thought to mark the trail. Other than that, there's plenty of room."

The air was fragrant here. The village had been built within a local cluster of blossoms, and the light was soft and pervasive. Rebel liked it.

It could have used a little more life. Butterflies at least. A few lizards, a squirrel, perhaps a tree squid. But other than that, it was pleasant here, sheltered within the orchid. "Maybe I *will* build a hut," she said. "I could spend my free time here. Who should I talk to about rent? Who's your king here?"

"There are no kings here," Fu-ya said. Billy tugged at his cloak, and the scholar handed him brush and paint. From the hut behind him, he drew a piece of paper. "Here, have fun."

"No kings?" Treece said, puzzled. "Then who owns all this?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps no one. Perhaps the man in the wheel." He spread his hands. "You see, when people realized they could build here, they didn't stop to worry about legalities. They just packed up and moved in."

One of Fu-ya's neighbors came up with a sphere of fresh-brewed tea and a handful of drinking syringes. Scowling, Treece took one, and said, "Why? Why burrow so deep in the orchid? Why post a guard by the trail?"

"Defense is simple here," the neighbor said. "One guard can hold off a dozen attackers. If more came, we could just untie the rags from the path—they'd never find their way in. Or if that didn't work . . . we'd all scatter, I guess. That'd be the end of the village, but there's others out there. Lots of room to build another, for that matter."

"No, no," Fu-ya said to Billy. "You want to hold the brush upright, between thumb and forefinger. There, you see? That way you won't smudge."

"Who are you expecting to attack you?" Treece said testily.

Another neighbor had come up, a large bony woman who seemed all knees and elbows whenever she moved. She said, "You're not from the tanks, then? No, I can see you're not. Well, the gang wars are heating up. It's funny. You live in the tanks, you think—what did the police ever do for me? Beat you up, smash your teeth, catch you up in their raids. But now, with no police, there's nothing to stop the gangs but each other. So they try to spread out. People were getting snatched up and reprogrammed all over the place. You don't watch out, you find yourself being rude girl for some hoodlum you never even heard of before. Only now, you're willing to die for him. Very bad. Especially now that everybody has these rifles—have you seen them? Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Everybody?" Treece said. "I noticed your guard had one. She shouldn't. Those are supposed to be restricted to programmed samurai."

The villagers laughed. There were some eight people sitting about by now. "There must be a hundred rifles in the tanks," Fu-ya explained. "Maybe even two hundred. It's a very bad problem." He had seated Billy

in his lap. Now he looked down and said, "Hey, look at that. That is very good."

Billy Defector did not look up. He was drawing circuits on the paper, long glowing lines and intersections like cool rivers of light, straight and pure and enigmatic.

Somewhere, Wyeth was fighting a wizard's duel with the Comprise. Possibly it was already over. But here, sitting and chatting and laughing, all was peace. A girl who ducked her head, coloring, whenever spoken to, brought out a flute and began to play. Somebody produced two short metal pipes, and provided percussion. Soon a band had coalesced, and people were dancing.

Rebel didn't join in. To her way of thinking, zero-gravity dancing was like zero-gravity sex, a lightweight version of the real thing. While Billy drew his circuits, she attached him to a programmer. "Don't wriggle," she said, and put him in a trance. Her hands slid down the wafers, and she lost herself in the delicate art of editing. This was the kind of work both her personas enjoyed, and for at least an hour she had no clear idea who she was. Then her hands hovered over the wafers in indecision and drew away. With a sigh, she removed the adhesion disks. Billy stirred. Fu-ya's woman, Gretzin, said, "Is your little boy all right now?"

"I'm just the doctor," Eucrasia said irritably. "The little boy doesn't belong to me or anybody else for that matter. He's an orphan, I guess." Then, with a gentle internal shift, she was Rebel again. "He'll need lots more work before he's all right. I only dared make minor changes, because he's so fragile. There's only a trace of personality to work on—just the memory of a hallucinogenic persona, really. It's not the easiest thing to set right."

Fu-ya swam up and lifted the child away. "Come on, Billy. I'll show you how to fold a paper bird."

Gretzin stared after the two. "I didn't really think he was your little boy. I just kind of hoped." She snorted. "Paper birds!"

The sheraton was a mess. Uprooted trees floated over drowned parasols in the ponds. Rebel skirted a pile of broken glass. She trailed a finger along a wall, and it came up stained with soot. "Where's Billy?" Wyeth asked, coming up on her suddenly.

"I found a couple in the orchid and hired them to look after him. He's staying in their village."

"Why did you do that?"

"I thought they'd be good for him. A little quiet living should strengthen his sense of identity enough for me to try a bit more editing." They matched strides. "Oh hell, Billy took a shine to Fu-ya, and when

I tried to take him away, he started screaming hysterically. I was afraid if I separated them his emotions might run out of control, and collapse what little mental structure he has."

"Hmmm." They stepped around a team of wallknobbers and scrimshaw artisans. Workers were everywhere, making repairs. "Look here. I want to show you something."

A morgue had been set up in the conference room, the corpses laid out on gurneys by the goldfish stream. There were seven cadavers, all Comprise. "I panicked them into moving early," Wyeth said. "That's one reason the casualties were so low. They knew they couldn't take over the sheraton permanently, and that they'd have to pay reparations for any humans killed." He stopped at a Comprise corpse whose torso was cut open, and the skin peeled back. Rebel looked down at the glistening organs, horrified and fascinated. Metal glinted here and there. Wyeth picked up a hand and turned it over. "See here? Retractable patch leads inside each fingertip. All she had to do was bite off a bit of callus on the tip and she could interface with anything. There are three separate rectenna systems buried under the skin, and a second spine with God knows how many gigabytes of storage capacity."

"My God," Rebel said. "Are they *all* like this?"

"No, just five. We call them lockpicks because their sole purpose is to break into computer systems. The Comprise hide a few inside every group they send into human space. They were easy to spot, because they're carrying all that metal within them. As soon as we took them out, the fight was over."

"Killed." Constance limped in, trailed closely by Freeboy. He had a dirty bandage on his head. "You did not 'take them out,' Mr. Wyeth. You killed them." Several embroidered panels in her clothing were stained; she reeked of smoke and wrath.

"Aren't you supposed to be tending to the shrubberies, Moorfields?"

"My people are taking care of that. I want to know why you provoked this senseless, brutal battle."

A tech reached into an access hatch by the foot of the bridge. The sky flickered and went on. Blue, with big, fleecy clouds.

"Oh, hardly a battle." Wyeth smiled. "And far from senseless. It certainly took the starch out of the Comprise. Half of them are down with shyapple sickness. Also, I learned a great deal from this incident. Means of fighting the Comprise, which I've taken the liberty of taping and sending to every major public data bank in the System. They'll be there when they're needed." His voice switched from warrior to mystic. "Someday, humanity is going to have to fight the Comprise. Someday the conflict will be out in the open. And when that happens, we'll be the tiniest bit better prepared because of today."

"You sound like you're looking forward to a nice, big war."

"No, but unlike you, I see it as inevitable. Ah, here are the lawyers." Two men in legalface, one People's, the other Kluster, strode up. Wyeth bowed to Rebel. "Shall we?"

They crossed the bridge and walked in among the Comprise. First came Wyeth, arm in arm with Rebel, and then the lawyers. Constance hesitated, then followed, and Freeboy scuttled after her. Four samurai brought up the rear. "Over the Rubicon," Wyeth said cheerily, but to Rebel it felt more like crossing the Styx, to the land where the bloodless dead dwell in perfect equality. The Comprise parted for them, closing back around the group as it passed. Hundreds of eyes stared at them.

Wyeth chose a man at random, grabbed him by the shoulders, and said, "You. Can you talk? We'll talk through this individual."

"That is not necessary," the Comprise said.

"That's how we'll do it anyway. I'm going to ask you some questions. If I am not satisfied with the answers, I'll charge you with violent aggression and see to it that the four hundred however many of you never rejoin Earth again. Do you want that? I can do that to you."

The Comprise stirred uneasily. "You manipulated us into attacking you."

"So what?" Wyeth turned to his lawyers. "Does that make any difference legally?"

"No."

"No."

Rebel touched her bracelet and saw the tangled lines of energy linking the Comprise in a shimmering haze. Electromagnetic fields rose from them like wings. Directional beams blinked on and off, converging upon the spokesman. He flashed bright as the eye of a coiled dragon. "Ask, then."

"What does the Comprise want?"

Almost scornfully, the Comprise said, "What does any organism want? To live, to grow, and to employ one's abilities constructively."

"I was thinking of something a little less sweeping. Why did you want the shyapples so badly? You almost killed young Freeboy here, trying to get information he didn't even have. What information were you hoping to find? What did you want that badly?"

"Earth is interested in all new developments in the mind arts."

"Answers," Wyeth said grimly.

Again the Comprise shifted in agitation. Individuals jostled against each other; heads turned at random. Several cried out. "We—" the spokesman began. He paused as the interactive fields shifted configurations wildly, withdrew, and then closed in about him. "We seek integrity. We

seek a means of maintaining our identity as Comprise when we are separated from Earth."

"Integrity? I don't understand."

"Away from Earth, we are cut off, orphaned," the Comprise said. "We lose identity. You could not understand. Our sense of being Earth fades and shifts. We become Other. You would say individual. We do not desire this. It is painful to us."

"Ah," said Wyeth. "Now that is interesting."

"Are you satisfied now?" Constance demanded. Wyeth looked at her. "You've been torturing this creature for your own . . . your own paranoid fantasies, that's all. You are a dangerous man, Mr. Wyeth, a machine running out of control and causing pain for no purpose at all."

Rebel reached out, touched the spokesman's wrist. "Tell me something," she said hesitantly. "Is Wyeth right? Are humans and Comprise really enemies?"

"Of course not," Constance snapped.

"Yes," the Comprise said. "We are by definition natural enemies since we compete for the same resources."

"Resources? You mean like—what? Energy sources? Metal ores?"

"People. People are our most important resource."

Constance stood motionless, looking pale and betrayed. "I—" she said. "I thought—" Her voice was close to tears. Abruptly she turned away and limped back across the bridge, to the land of the living. Freeboy scurried after her.

Not actually grinning, Wyeth favored Rebel with a nod and a wink. He turned to the Comprise. "Another question. Why haven't you taken over human space already? You have all the resources of Earth at your disposal, and the kind of physics we can only dream of. Why have you stayed put? Why aren't you out here among us in force?"

The crowds of Comprise expanded slightly, then contracted, like an enormous beast taking a deep breath. "We are held back by the speed of communication. It is not true that thought is instantaneous. Thought is only as fast as our electronic linkages allow. Even on Earth this causes problems. It is possible for the Comprise to be divided against ourself. Thought moves in vast waves, like pressure fronts, across the continents. Sometimes two conflicting thoughts arise on opposite sides of the planet. The thought fronts race outward, and where they collide, there is conflict. It is like a mental storm. You would not understand it. But these are momentary unbalances, easily settled. The problem becomes crucial only when Comprise leave Earth.

"Earth has tried creating colonies of ourself in near orbit, on the moon, elsewhere. But small Comprise such as we are sicken away from the communion of thought. We become indecisive, we make errors. The large

Comprise do not sicken, but they lose integrity and drift away from Earth, becoming individuals in their own right. Then they must be destroyed. Three times it has been necessary to apply the nuclear solution. It is not permissible that the Comprise of Earth become Other. You would not understand."

"I see," Wyeth said. "I think I see. That's the reason for your interest in the mind arts, then? You want a means of keeping Comprise colonies integrated with Earth."

"Yes. For a long time Earth has sought the answer in physics. A means of instantaneous communication would bind the Comprise across vast distances. But the speed of light remains an absolute barrier. It cannot be cheated. There is no simultaneity in the universe. So we look elsewhere. Perhaps a solution can be found in the mind arts. Perhaps a new mental architecture."

"That brings me to my next question—"

"No," the Comprise said. "You are satisfied. Sickened though we are, we can read you that well, Boss Wyeth. You got as much from us as you had hoped for. We need give you no more." The spokesman took a step backwards, merging into his fellows. Hundreds of eyes all turned away at once.

For a moment Wyeth stood open-mouthed. Then he laughed.

When they made love that night, Wyeth was awkward and he came too soon. He rolled away from Rebel, staring out the window wall. Faint strands of orchid floated slowly by as the sheraton revolved. "Wyeth?" Rebel said gently. He looked at her, eyes bleak and hollow. "What is it?"

Wyeth shook his head, looked downward. "I have a sick conscience. I am not at all at peace with myselves."

"Hey," Rebel said. "Hey, babes, it's all right." She took his hand, held it in both of hers. "Which one of you is this? It's the leader, right?"

"Yes, but we all feel this way. Constance was right. About the kid. Billy was perfectly content as part of the Comprise. Not happy, not aware—but content, anyway. And then I appear in a blaze of light and a rush of noise, and yank him into consciousness. Here, kid, have an apple. Bright and shiny. Let me make you one of us. I dragged him out of the Comprise and halfway to human, and made him into what? A crippled, crazy, unhappy animal of some kind."

"Hey, now, it wasn't your fault he ate the shyapple. The Comprise did that. It caught us all by surprise."

Wyeth sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He sat there, not moving. "You think not? I waved that apple under their noses. I wanted them to bite. I wanted to see what would happen. But when I pried Billy loose from the Comprise, it turned out he didn't know one

fucking thing. So what good did I do? None. I acted blindly, and now there's one more miserable creature walking the sky."

"I'll heal him for you, Wyeth, I promise I will. I'm coming to terms with Eucrasia's skills." Rebel hugged him from behind, crushing her breasts against his back, laid her cheek against his shoulder. "Listen, I can really do it."

Wyeth shook his head back and forth ponderously. "That's not it. That's not it at all." She released him, rocking back on her heels. "Undoing the damage won't help. The thing is, I don't want to be the kind of person who'd do that to a child."

Rebel said nothing.

"Do you remember when we first met? I was just a persona bum. Very bright, very good, but with no idea what I wanted to do with my life. The one thing I wanted most was to have a sense of purpose. We collaborated on the tetrad's design together, do you remember that?"

"No."

"That's too bad. It was an exciting piece of work. We put lots of late hours into it. It was pirate programming, we had to do it in secret. Eucrasia came up with the notion of a four-faceted persona for the stability, the self-sufficiency of it. She was hell for self-sufficiency. I was more interested in it because it would generate its own sense of purpose."

Rebel felt irrationally jealous of Eucrasia, working so closely with Wyeth. She wondered if they'd slept together, and felt an oddly unclean excitement at the thought.

"How?" she asked.

"The pattern-maker. I figured he'd take care of that. He did, too. First time he came up, he asked what is the most important thing happening in our times? How can we contribute to it? The answers—well, you know the answers. Eucrasia was disappointed. She thought I was being grandiose and impractical, and she wanted to strip the program down and start over again. So we parted ways. I mean . . . the survival of the human race! What better cause could you have?" He fell silent, then said, "Only now I don't know. Maybe what I really wanted was to have a good opinion of myself. I mean, I made me into a kind of secular saint, a self-contained guardian of humanity. A man with no doubts. But now I'm not so sure. I'm not sure of anything. I guess I don't know myself as well as I thought I did."

"Hush now," Rebel said. She put her arms around him, rocking him gently. But they might as well be in different universes. Eucrasia's memories were growing stronger. Soon they would swallow her up completely, and then she would be no more. She wanted to care about Wyeth's problems, but they just didn't seem important to her.

"Hush," she said again. "You're not alone."

Rebel visited Billy daily, after singlestick practice. But she quickly found that while she lived by the sheraton's strict Greenwich time, the village ran on different, internal rhythms. People ate when they were hungry, slept when they were tired, kept to no external schedule. Sometimes she would find that by village time only a few languid hours had passed. Other times, days would have sped by in a frenzy of work and play, of long naps and small meals.

One day she discovered that thousands of small spider webs, no bigger than tufts of cotton, had covered the orchid about the village like mist. In the filtered white wintery light, the children played a game with a rusting air tank. A child would leap into the court and bounce off the tank, kicking it toward the far side. Then a child from that side would jump out, trying to bounce it back. One girl got stuck in the court's center, and was loudly and derisively called out. Then the game started over again.

Gretzin sat before her hut, weaving a grass mat to replace a worn wall. Rebel greeted her, then said, "Where did all these spiders come from?"

"Where do you think they come from? The tanks," Gretzin said impatiently. "Lots of vermin been spreading out. You should've been here yesterday, there were blackflies everywhere. Clouds of them."

She put the mat aside. "Fu-ya's sleeping. Hold on, and I'll get your little boy."

A minute later she returned, hauling Billy by one arm. "I don't want to!" he cried. "I want to play!" Seeing Rebel, he started to cry.

Rebel felt an odd sadness that the boy didn't like her. A cold touch of failure. "Well, that's a sign of progress," she said to Gretzin. "His temper." She ran a hand over his head, and the delicate fuzz of new hair tickled her palm like static electricity. Gretzin had cut off his braid; possibly the children had been teasing him. "This won't take long at all, Billy."

She put him under and went to work.

An hour later she released Billy and called Gretzin over. "There's not a lot more for me to do. His identity is a little fragile yet, but it'll strengthen in time. Basically, he should be able to pass for human now."

"Pass for human, huh?" Gretzin said.

"Yes, it's good timing, too, since we reach Mars soon. I don't know what Wyeth will do with him then." She covered her uneasiness about the boy's future with a smile. "I'll bet you'll be glad not having to worry about him anymore."

"Yeah. That'll be terrific."

Being outside the geodesic after all this time was a shock. Some free-

floating spores must have adhered to the hull before it was accelerated away from Eros Kluster, for it was now covered with great mottled mats of vacuum flowers. They were everywhere, growing in tangled heaps and piles. The blossoms twisted slowly, tracking the sun.

The flowers had been scraped away from the airlock and for dozens of meters around, revealing a hull that was dull, pitted and uneven. Scatterings of foot rings had been snap-welded across the cleared surface. Standing in a pair, Rebel felt a perfectly irrational urge to start scraping flowers. Her hands itched with it.

Wyeth stood beside her, overseeing the departure of the Comprise. Almost half a thousand coldpack units were being lashed to a single jitney frame, layer upon layer building into a crude sphere. Inside those soot black coffins were suspended the Comprise, throats and lungs filled with crash jelly. Spacejacks swarmed about them.

"Hey, look." Rebel touched Wyeth, pointed. Two unmarked silver suits crawled across the geodesic toward them. Among the carnival riot of personalized suits worn by the workers recruited from the tanks and orchid villages, they stood out as startlingly as a croquet ball in a case of Fabergé Easter eggs.

The intercom crackled. "I can't believe they trust you to coldpack them after what you put them through."

"Aren't you supposed to be checking how far through the hull the flowers have eaten?" Wyeth asked.

The silver figures pulled themselves almost to his feet, slipped into rings and stood. "That's what I came to report. You've got four inches skin at the very thinnest. Nothing to worry about."

The spacejacks brought up a disposable fusion drive at the end of a kilometer-long connector rod and coupled it to the jitney, hot end away from the Comprise. They leaped away and (using long ropes) yanked the shielding. "Well, stay and watch the show if you want, Connie. Hallo, Freeboy. Still with us, I see."

"He's as loyal as a wizard's daughter," Constance said dryly. An almost invisible plasma flame puffed from the engine, and the assembly started away.

Three days, Rebel thought. Two to reach Mars, be intercepted and fitted with retros by People's Defense, decelerate, and be unpacked. One day for the Comprise to build the transit ring that would bring the geodesic's velocity to relative zero, leaving it at rest in Mars orbit. It wouldn't take much of a mistake for them to miss the ring entirely, crashing the project and all its people right into the side of the planet.

"They were as helpless as a vat of kitten embryos," Constance said. "I can't imagine why they trusted you. I certainly wouldn't have."

"The Comprise is not human." Wyeth's mirrored visor turned toward her. "They don't carry personal grudges."

Constance looked away, toward the dwindling coldpack assembly, then turned back and with sudden heat said, "I'm *glad* we're parting ways at Mars!" She bent over to grab the foot rings, then pulled herself hand over hand toward the airlock. Freeboy followed.

When she was gone, Wyeth said softly, "I'm going to miss that woman."

The next day, when Rebel reached the village she found it deserted. Spiders had shrouded the huts in white. A woven wall, ripped from its frame, floated in a silent curl at the center of the court. "Hello?" she called.

No sound but the buzzing of flies.

All the huts were vacant, their contents largely undisturbed. A brush frozen in a bowl of hardened ink floated by Fu-ya's door. Trailed by her two samurai, Rebel looked down all the twisty paths that had been marked out from the village to private plantations, clearings, and the like. They went a distance down the red rag trail, and then the blue, but found nothing but more empty huts.

Rebel took a long, shuddering breath. She felt her fear prowling through the orchid depths, silent and shadowy. "Treece, what happened here?"

The second samurai offered Treece a bit of blood-stained cloth that the flies had drawn him to. Treece brushed it aside, examined a fractured wetwafer. "Press gang," he said. "Very slick, whoever they were. Took out the guard, surrounded the village, didn't miss anyone. Put a compulsion on them and took them all away."

"Away?" Rebel asked. "Where away? Why?"

Treece bent the wetwafer back and forth in his blunt fingers. At last he shrugged. "Well. Let's go tell the boss."

"I don't like it," Wyeth said. "Look, none of us likes it, but it's the only logical way to proceed." Dice clicked and rattled obsessively in his hand. He threw them down, scooped them up. "We don't know for sure that it's Wismon. Let's not kid ourselves—I haven't had any news from the tanks in two days. Only Wismon could've found and silenced my spies."

They stood in the empty lobby of the sheraton. Wyeth had dismissed all his samurai and darkened the room so he could think. The only light came from the orchids outside. "What are you arguing with yourself about?" Rebel asked in exasperation.

"Strategy." Wyeth rolled the dice again. "I can't go up against Wismon in my warrior persona. He'd be able to predict my every move. The only way I can take him by surprise is to go mystic. Right?" He waited, and

none of his other voices spoke up. "Good. At last we're agreed about that." He rolled the dice again.

"For God's sake, what is it with you and those dice?"

"Random number generator. By randomizing my tactics, I keep Wismon from anticipating me. Already the dice have decided on direct confrontation on his home turf. Now they're deciding how many samurai I take with me." He rolled again, fell silent.

In the dark and quiet, Rebel's thoughts kept returning to Billy. His persona was fragile. Any crude attempt at reprogramming would destroy him, collapsing not only his personality structure, but much of his autonymous control systems as well. The best he could hope for was permanent catatonia. At worst, he might die. "They wouldn't reprogram the children, would they?"

"Depends," Wyeth answered abstractedly. "Slavers wouldn't need to, once they've grabbed the parents. But who can say, with Wismon? We don't even know why he did it. My people tell me this is the only orchid village he's hit. That's not just coincidence." He took a deep breath. "Well. Time to go meet the man."

Impulsively, Rebel asked, "Can I come with you?"

Wyeth shook the dice, looked at them.

"Yes."

As the elevator slowly rose toward the central docking ring, Rebel thought to ask: "How many samurai are you bringing?"

"None," Wyeth said somberly. His mischievous voice came up. *"That'll* sure take Wismon by surprise. I can't wait to see how we're going to handle him."

They rode broomsticks around the orchid. As the tanks swelled, they saw that the metal exteriors were covered with glowing lines of paint—gang chops, territorial markings, threats and warnings, a small propaganda war in graffiti. There was no traffic. Everyone had either fled or been impressed into the gangs. "I'm afraid," Rebel said.

Beside her, Wyeth grinned cockily. "Me too."

The closer she got to the tanks, the less clear Rebel's motives for going were to her. She'd wanted to have a hand in rescuing Billy, but now that they were at the crunch point, that desire seemed sourceless and quixotic. She wasn't exactly close to the child. Certainly he didn't much care for her. So why was she doing this?

Maybe because Eucrasia wouldn't have.

They swooped down on Tank Fourteen. The airlock's outer doors had been blown away in some recent skirmish, and there were blast marks among the rust. But to judge by the way a few dimly-seen guards floated within, slow and unconcerned, the gang wars were obviously over.

At the locks, bright-eyed women kicked out of the shadows to take their broomsticks and search them for weapons. The women were painted with bioluminescent tiger-stripes, not just on their faces, but down their bodies as well, and they were all stark naked. "We've come to see Wismon," Wyeth said when one brought out a programming unit. "Tell him that his mentor wishes to speak with him."

The women glanced at one another quickly, uncomprehendingly. One smiled, and licked her lips. She held up the programmer again, and Wyeth impatiently pushed it away. "Listen, your boss isn't going to—"

With a snarl, the woman seized his head in both hands, and twisted. Wyeth grunted in pain as he spun about. The cat woman's legs wrapped about his thighs, and her hands cupped his chin. She yanked back, and he floated helplessly.

All this happened in an instant. "Hey!" Rebel said, and then she was floating in a similar hold, unable to talk and barely able to breathe. She tried to hit the woman on her back, but it was an awkward reach, and her hardest blows were soft taps when they landed.

In a wash of horror, Rebel saw the cat women attach the programmer to Wyeth and switch it on. He stiffened. The device buzzed softly to itself. I won't let them do that to me, Rebel promised herself. I'll die first. She struggled in her captor's iron hold.

Those guards not directly involved watched with alert interest. They prowled restlessly about the lock without ever once exchanging a word; their silence was superhuman. Two almost collided, but disdainfully, carelessly, slapped hands together and bounced off each other. Finally a red light flashed on the programmer, and Wyeth was released. He floated dead-eyed and unresponsive.

The women turned to Rebel.

"Heads up, Sunshine!" Lashing out with one foot, Wyeth kicked the cheap little programmer from one cat woman's hands, right into the face of the woman who held Rebel captive. For an instant she was free. Spinning around, she punched her captor in the nose, as hard as she could, and blood exploded outward from her fist. By then a dozen more guards had converged upon them, and they were both recaptured.

One woman retrieved the programmer, broke it open, reassembled it. She ran a finger over Wyeth's forehead, then brought her face close to his and sniffed his lips. She looked puzzled. Meanwhile, others had bound his wrists and ankles together behind his back, and done the same to Rebel. "Wyeth?" Rebel asked. "Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah," Wyeth said. Two of the guards looped ropes around their wrists and kicked off. They were yanked after. "That's my best trick. When we built me, I was given access to my own metaprogrammer. All

the time they were programming one persona up, another persona was programming it down."

"Oh."

They were hauled through the deserted corridors of the tank town. Without the traffic continually sweeping them clean, the narrow corridors were dense with trash. The flowers seemed barely able to lighten the gloom, and there was a thrumming quality to the silence, like vastly extenuated echoes of distant bass rumblings. The stench of rot and decay was almost unbearable.

They were taken to Wismon.

"Ah, mentor! As always, a surprise to see you. What a delight!"

The fat man floated behind a guard of sullen rude boys, his mad little eyes dark with inner furies. A thin string of saliva clung to one corner of his mouth, waving slightly as he talked. "How do you like my angel-headed little girls? Lovely, aren't they?"

"They're certainly something," Wyeth said. "What have you done to them?" Behind him, the women snapped his bonds, and then Rebel's. There were two pairs of rings by Wismon's ankles, and the guards knelt within them, crouching at his feet. He reached out to clumsily pat one on the head, and she arched her back in pleasure.

"I've increased their intelligence—they're quite as smart as I am. Ah, don't turn pale. I've also deprived them of language. They have no symbolic structure at all. They cannot make plans, cannot reason complexly, cannot lie. All they know is what instructions I've programmed into them. Isn't that marvelous? They're perfectly innocent. They act by instinct alone."

"They're grotesque," Rebel said.

"They are very beautiful animals," Wismon said reprovingly. "One of their instincts is to bring me anything out of the ordinary. Anything interesting. Are you still interesting, mentor?"

"I've always wondered what sort of society you would create," Wyeth said.

"Oh, piffle. I'm just having a little fun. I only have three days before we reach Mars, isn't that right? And then I'll have to put my toys back in the box, and return to a gentlemanly life of quiet contemplation. The pity is that so much time was wasted dealing with factions of petty criminals that might more profitably have been used for my researches."

"You're going to restore everyone you've forcibly programmed?" Wyeth sounded skeptical.

"Oh, absolutely. Except for my rude boys, of course. I had them before all this began. And I think I'll keep my beautiful little girls, how could I ever bring myself to give them up? And there are a few more that might prove useful in the future . . . but enough of that! I mentioned my re-

searches? Well, I flatter myself that I've made some small progress. I have created a garden—no, a menagerie of new minds. Perhaps you'd care for a brief tour of the highlights?"

"No."

"A pity. I remember a time when you were not so scornful of scientific endeavor."

"I was young then."

"Wait," Rebel said impulsively. "I'd like to see what you've done." Wyeth turned to her, astonished.

"Well! An original thought—you charm me, Ms. Mudlark. I will deny you nothing." Wismon extended his arms and the cat women stood under them, each stretching a supporting arm across the immensity of his back. "Where's my zookeeper? Call him to me."

A sullen rude boy ducked into an archway. A moment later he returned, followed by a young man painted for wetware research.

"Maxwell!" Rebel cried.

"I knew you'd have a spy in my organization," Wyeth said with a touch of sadness. "Did you buy him or just reprogram him?"

"Oh, I assure you he acted not for any ignoble reasons, but purely out of love. You do love me, don't you, Maxie?"

Maxwell nodded eagerly, face rapt. His expression was at once so ardent and so familiar that Rebel had to look away. "Lead us to your charges," Wismon said. "I grow bored."

The party floated out of the court. Maxwell led, followed by Wismon and his cat women. They eased him along with feather-light kicks and grabs against the walls and ropes. Rebel and Wyeth came next, escorted by a guard of rude boys. They came to a confluence of passages, and halted.

"What shall I show you? I've arranged my creations by type. Would you care to go down the tunnel of fear? The straight and narrow way of discipline? Or perhaps you two lovebirds would enjoy a kick and stroll down lovers' lane." They said nothing, and Wismon flapped a bloated pink hand at one passage. "We'll go the way of delusion, then. I have something I'm especially eager for my dear mentor to see."

They went up the red rope to a nondescript court. At a word from Wismon, Maxwell led them within. It was quiet there. A man sat in the doorway of his hutch, eyes downcast as if lost in thought. He was hooked into a small transcorder unit. "Cousin!" Wismon cried. "Sam Pepys!"

The man scrambled to his feet, bracing himself within the frame. "My Lord!" he said. "You do me honor, coming to Seething Lane." He swept a hand at an imaginary table. "I was just now working on your accounts."

To Wyeth, the fat man said, "Samuel Pepys was a clerk of the British


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navy on Earth in the seventeenth century. A ludicrous little man, but able enough in his way. A bit of a diarist. The transcorder feeds him a wafer of background sensation. His only connection with the real world is through myself. He takes me to be his relative, Edward Montagu, Earl of Sandwich. Isn't that right, Samuel?"

The man smiled gravely and bowed, obviously pleased. "Your Lordship gives me too great a credit. Will you stay to dine? Mr. Spong has sent over a barrel of pickled oysters; I'll have the girl fetch it. Jane! Where is that lazy slut?" He looked fretfully over one shoulder, setting the transcorder leads swinging.

"It's a simple enough delusional system," Rebel said. "Rich people have been known to spend good money for two weeks of that kind of delusion. I've arranged for a few such vacations myself." That had been during Eucrasia's internship, she recalled. It had been dull work, cookie-cutter programming, but (because legally dubious) lucrative.

"Ah, but always under sensory deprivation, eh? Otherwise small incongruities creep in from the real world." A cat woman was exploring the court. She sniffed curiously at Pepys' crotch. He didn't notice. "Right in the middle of the battle of Thermopylae, a city cannister eclipses the sun. On virgin Arctic snow, a lone papaya glows with otherworldly light. Little by little your dream world crumbles into paranoia and nightmare. But the beauty of *this* system is its flexibility. It can justify any amount of incongruity. Samuel, I have noticed a great number of brontosauri in the streets of London this past week."

Pepys frowned. "Brontosauri, my Lord? The . . . ah, large, ancient lizards, you mean?"

"Aye, Samuel, three in Whitechapel alone, and two more by the 'Change. Down by Saint Paul's, the streets are filthy with their spoor. What make you of that, Cousin?"

"Why, that it will be a mightily cold winter," Pepys said. "The brutes never venture out in such numbers be the coming weather fair and clement."

"I fail to see the point of this," Wyeth said stiffly.

"Patience. Samuel, poke up the fire, would you?" Pepys obliged, seizing an imaginary poker and stirring up the logs and embers of a fireplace that was not there. The mime was so perfect that Rebel could almost see his stuffy little room, and feel its monotonously heavy gravity.

Suddenly Wismon shouted, "Samuel! A coal has landed on the back of your hand. It's burning the flesh!"

With a shriek of pain, Pepys tumbled over backwards, waving his hand. Spinning slowly in the air, he put hand to mouth and sucked on it. At a gesture from Wismon, two rude boys steadied him.

"Here, Cuz. Show me your hand."

Pepys extended a hand trembling with pain. An angry red circle swelled on its back. Even as they watched, pus-white blisters bubbled up on the inflamed spot. Wismon laughed. "Belief! Belief alone burned that hand. Think on it. It rather puts some starch into the ancient notion that all we experience is illusion to begin with, doesn't it?" He stroked the hand lovingly, breaking the blisters. "But Samuel doesn't perceive our illusions, only those that are pumped into him. All that stands between him and reality is one thin wafer of electronic London. Let's see what happens when we remove that final veil."

Maxwell held up the transcorder for Wismon, who daintily took the wafer's pull-ring between thumb and forefinger. "Samuel?"

"My Lord?"

"Tell me what you see." He yanked the wafer.

Pepys stiffened, and his eyes jerked open wide. Unblinking, they focused on infinity. "The walls! The walls fade like smoke! I can see through ceiling, rooms, and roof to the clouds beyond . . . Nay, the sky too is become pellucid and the stars stand bright and stark . . . But now e'en they too fade. I see . . ."

"What do you see, Sammy?"

For the longest moment Pepys was silent. Then, "Music," he said. "I see the music of the crystal spheres celestial." He began to cry gently.

Wismon giggled. "Perfect madness. I could as easily have had him die. Come. This is only prologue to what I really wish to show you, dearest mentor."

They exited, leaving Pepys afloat in the center of the court, weeping.

For half the length of the passage, Maxwell hesitated at each doorway, and was waved on. Then Wismon nodded and Maxwell peeled back a sheet of tin, and they entered a courtyard. Again it had but a single inhabitant, a man. He had a bland face with an enormous beak of a nose. Perched on a rope, he seemed some kind of ungainly bird. As they entered, he looked up and smiled. "Hallo," he said. "Quite a crowd."

"Yes, I've brought some friends to examine you," Wismon said. "You don't mind?"

"Oh, no."

"Question him," Wismon commanded.

"All right," Rebel said after a pause. "Do you know where you are?"

"This used to be Queen Lurline's court. She's gone now. I'm the only one here. King Wismon is holding me as an experiment in recursive personality." The man's eyes sparkled with mirth.

"Do you know who you are?"

"King Wismon calls me Nose. For self-evident reasons." He rubbed his fleshy nose and chuckled. Rebel looked to Wyeth and shrugged. There

was something askew in the man's sourceless, irrational humor, but nothing in her or Eucrasia's experience could explain it.

Wyeth looked thoughtful. "Let's see. You showed me that last guy—Pepys?—to demonstrate how perfect a delusionary system you could create. So this must be a refinement on that. What is a step beyond delusion?" He snapped his fingers, glanced at Rebel. "Reality!" She caught his reference: It came from something she'd said when he was new-programmed, and she'd wanted to strip his persona down and start over again. Delusion was hard enough to deal with, she'd said, but a frivolous grasp of reality was worse. "You don't believe that what you're seeing is real, do you?"

Nose kicked his feet with joy. He had to grab at the rope to keep from floating away. "Oh, this is most entertaining. Really!"

"Nose is a prototype of the perfect citizen," Wismon said. "His true persona is entirely hidden from the outside world. His surface persona is a perfectly consistent game the submerged persona plays. He thinks he is dreaming. To him, his entire past is an irrational construct that's just come into existence. Thus, he denies continuity but is able to act within it. He will accept anything, endure anything, for none of it is real. Which leaves me free to control his dreams. No matter what happens, he is happy to obey whatever instructions he receives. Isn't that right, Nose?"

Nose nodded happily.

"All right," Wyeth said sourly. "I'll ask the question you want me to ask. Why are you showing me this creature?"

"Oh, that's the best joke of all. Nose, why don't you tell us who you are when you're not dreaming?"

"Should I?" Nose laughed. "Well, what does it matter? My name is Wyeth. I was Wismon's mentor some years ago, and now I am his enemy. That's why I'm dreaming about him. He's getting out of hand, I'll have to do something about him soon. Possibly even destroy him. Maybe this dream will show me the pattern I have to act within."

"That was your mystic voice," Wismon said. "Do you care to hear your other voices? I can call them up from the depths, if you like."

"No," Wyeth said. "No, I—no." He was ashen pale. "This is what you have planned for me, isn't it?"

"What are you two talking about?" Rebel asked. Wismon mockingly mouthed the words in perfect unison with her, but she finished the sentence anyway.

"Please try not to be so obvious, Ms. Mudlark. My mentor has just realized that what I can do to his simulation I can do to him, access to metaprogrammer or not. He can be made into whatever I choose. But the joke goes deeper than that: Perhaps this man is not my mentor at

all, but merely some poor fool I've programmed into thinking he is. Perhaps Nose here is the true Wyeth. Perhaps neither of them is."

"Wyeth is Wyeth," Rebel said coldly. "If he can't trust his own sense of self, he can take my word for it."

"Ah, but how does he know that you exist? After all, I control the dream."

Nose laughed delightedly.

"What I don't understand," Wyeth said, "is how you've accomplished all this in so little time. You're a brilliant planner, but you don't have the programming skills to write up the personas. Where did you get the programmers? There's months of detail work in these two characters alone."

"Thus we come full circle," Wismon said. He flicked a finger at Maxwell, who disappeared out the doorway. "You have not yet mentioned why you entered my domain in the first place, but of course you didn't need to. You wanted to recover the child-savant you snatched from the Comprise."

"Yes, we came for Billy."

"You never tested him for his aptitudes. Most careless. To me the possibilities were obvious. Are you familiar with the cant term plumber? It means someone with a natural bent for the mechanics of wetcircuitry. In this child, the instinct is squared, or even cubed. He is preternaturally talented, a superplumber, if you will. I need only describe what I want, and he can draw it up."

Maxwell returned, leading Billy Defector by the hand. Behind him came Fu-ya and Gretzin, and from the apprehensive looks on their faces, Rebel could tell they had been left untouched so they could care for him.

"A thought has been germinating, mentor, for some time, and I think it has finally come to fruition," Wismon said. Maxwell handed the child a briefcase. "Billy. Bring up that map we made of my persona."

Billy looked at Gretzin, and she nodded. He touched the briefcase's surface, and an enormous wetware diagram filled all of the court with lacy green. There were tens of thousands of branchings visible to the naked eye alone. "Test it one more time for a kink, would you?"

Billy's fingers danced. A small red cursor zipped through the court, following the major persona branches, then moved to secondary and tertiary circuits. It moved too fast for the eye to fix on it for over a full minute, and then stopped. The solemn-faced child said, "No kink."

Wismon smiled.

"Well, it was inevitable that sooner or later you'd come to the conclusion that I've been bluffing," Wyeth said. "But the fact is that I'm not. You wish to believe I am because you're unwilling to accept me as your superior. But I could destroy you here and now with a single word."

"Then do it," Wismon said.

"Right in the middle of your traveling freak show?" There was an acid edge to Wyeth's voice. "Come off it. They'd rip my head off."

Heavy lids crept down over Wismon's eyes, until he appeared to be trembling on the brink of sleep. His every muscle froze to perfect stillness. Then, through lips that barely moved, he said, "Everyone here is to obey my mentor completely, no matter what he tells you to do. Only my direct orders override his. Do you understand? The two of us will talk now. Everyone else must wait outside." Two rude boys took Rebel by the arms and swept her through the doorway. "Are you satisfied now?" Wismon asked. But Rebel was already outside, and couldn't hear Wyeth's answer.

Time passed.

In the quiet of the corridor, the cat women prowled up and down the rope, endlessly fascinated by their eternally new world. Their movements seemed unbearably slow to Rebel, as if they moved through a crystalizing flow of honey. One of the rude boys broke into a hutch and emerged wearing a woman's lace collar. He primped and postured while the others laughed. Every now and then one would glance at Rebel, wistful dreams of violence in his eyes. Nose chuckled to himself.

At last the sheet metal door shivered and groaned and swung open. Wyeth swam out of the court, and gestured to Fu-ya, Gretzin, and Billy. "Escort these people to the sheraton," he told the dumbfounded rude boys. "The cat women can wait here." He took Rebel's arm and kicked downpassage. Maxwell stared unbelievingly after him, then dove into the court.

"You weren't bluffing, then. You really did put a kink in him," Rebel marveled.

Wyeth shook his head. "You don't need a kink to destroy a persona, if you know its weaknesses well enough. Wismon's blind spot was his conceit. He had to prove that he could best me on my own turf. It made him overlook the obvious."

"But what did you *do?*"

"I snapped his neck," Wyeth said. "Come on, I don't want to talk about it."

Behind them, Maxwell found the body and screamed.

It took a full day for Wyeth's samurai to scour the tanks clean of Wismon's creatures. In dribs and drabs, pairs and dozens, they were brought to the sheraton to be restored. The task would have been impossible without Billy Defector. Under his fingers, the elaborate programs needed to repair the damaged personas flowed magically into existence. Fu-ya or Gretzin could coax the child into working for two or three hours before he turned cranky. Then he would be allowed to play

for a time before being returned to the task. Twice, he put in a night's sleep.

Rebel fine-tuned a programmer, slid in the therapeutic wafer, turned to the next gurney, and realized that they were done. She stretched, looking about the conference room. Where the topiary garden had been, Constance's team had resodded the floor and installed a croquet lawn. An antique pink Martian sky played monotonously overhead. It had been forty hours since she'd slept last. "You know what? I don't think I'll ever be able to think of this room without loathing."

"I know what you mean," Wyeth said. With a sigh, he slowly sat down. An attentive pierrot slid a chair under him just in time.

"I've been cured of the urge to create new minds, too. I mean, just seeing the monstrosities that Wismon created."

"Yeah, well, it's been rough on both of us. But I still feel that new minds are necessary if the human race is going to face the challenge of Earth. We can't just walk into the future with wetware evolved sometime in the neolithic and expect . . ." His voice trailed off, and he slumped back in his chair. "Hell, I'm too tired to talk about it."

Gretzin returned from the goldfish stream, where Billy had been playing. The child slumped in her arms, his head hooked over her shoulder. Seeing them both seated, she said, "You done with Billy now?"

"Oh," Wyeth said groggily. "Okay, sure. Why don't you find someplace to put him, and then you can hunt up the paymaster and get your money. I'll have them give you double pay. You deserve it after all you've been through."

"Yeah, right," Gretzin said. "Tell you what, I'll take Billy back to the village first and get his things. Fu-ya is there now, getting them together. Pictures and crap. Won't take but an hour. I can pick up my pay when I get back."

"Fine." Wyeth waved a hand of dismissal, and Gretzin left.

"Be right back," Rebel said, and followed after. She caught up to Gretzin in the lobby. Billy was asleep on her shoulder, looking like a shavepate angel. "Listen," Rebel said. "You can borrow my broomstick, it's as fast as any. I've got it tethered at the hub."

Gretzin's harsh face twisted almost into a smile, and she leaned forward to brush lips dry as old leaves across Rebel's cheek. "Goodbye," she said, and stepped into the elevator.

A few minutes later, back in the conference room, Wyeth straightened abruptly. "Hey! Why does she need to take Billy with her to pick up his things? She could leave him sleep here while she did that." He pitched his voice for an intercom line. "Has the village woman come through there?"

"Yes, sir," a samurai replied. "She took a broomstick toward the orchid some five minutes ago."

"Damn!" Wyeth lurched to his feet.

"Wyeth," Rebel said. "Let her go."

"What are you talking about? That kid's got a brilliant future ahead of him. It'd be a crime to waste a talent like his. We can't let him grow up in the slums without any kind of training."

When they got to the orchid they found Rebel's broomstick abandoned by its fringe. The path markings were gone. They were just in time to see a dim, distant figure snatch one last rag from its place, and disappear into the gloom.

The village was lost for good.

Chapter Nine: DEIMOS

The geodesic hurtled toward Mars. In its last hour of travel, the stormy red planet grew from the size of a fist to larger than a platter. Deimos crept humbly toward the center of the planet, then suddenly blossomed, dwarfing and eclipsing Mars. To the party watching over the lobby intercom, it seemed they were about to crash into the ungainly looking moon. Then the geodesic tripped a magnetic trigger and shot into the waiting transit ring. The ring accelerated the space through which it traveled to a velocity equal but opposite in vector to what the geodesic had.

And there it stood.

The Comprise began disassembling the ring. Within the sheraton the assembled employees, everyone from Constance Frog Moorfields down to the lowliest pierrot, cheered. A steelpipe percussion group struck up, and the paymasters broke open their salary machines. Lids were yanked from troughs of wine. "Well," Wyeth said sadly, "it's over."

Rebel gave him a quick hug.

A few minutes later a party of five citizens entered the geodesic to take possession. They wore *cache-sexes* the color of mildew, with matching utilitarian cloaks that were recomplicated with straps, loops, and cinches, and knee-high gravity boots.

After the delicate paintlines of Eros Kluster, the People's paint seemed blunt and graceless—a simple green triangle covering nose and eyes. Under the triangles, humorless mouths. The party toured the sheraton in disapproving silence. At last their leader, a man named Stilicho, said, "I suppose it's what we contracted for."

"Good. Then you'll summon a member of the Stavka for me to surrender authority to?" Wyeth asked.

A stern young woman curled her lip in scorn. "You outsiders and your cult of leadership! The Stavka is merely a jurisdictional body chosen by random lot. The People will honor any legal commitment made by any citizen." She had a low jaw, grey crewcut hair, and a muscular body with bright, perky nipples, pink as rosebuds.

"That may well be," Wyeth said. "However, my superiors still require a member of the Stavka. So I'm afraid that your word will not be sufficient."

"Enough," Stilicho said impatiently. "I myself am of the Stavka. I will accept all responsibility."

"May I see your credentials?"

"No."

Stilicho and Wyeth glared at one another. Wyeth was wearing his warrior face. Jaws set and eyes ablaze, the two reminded Rebel of nothing so much as a pair of tropical apes caught in a silent territorial dispute.

At last Wyeth's head canted over at a wry angle, and he showed his teeth in a grin. "What the hell, Stilch, your word is good enough for me," he said. "I'm not proud."

Before Stilicho could respond, Rosebuds said, "I will take over here." She slid an arm through Wyeth's, and steered him away from her leader. "It will take several days to decommission this project. In the meantime, the People will provide you with quarters on Deimos." She glanced at Rebel and added, "And also for your staff."

"What's wrong with us staying in the sheraton?" Rebel asked.

"You will be given the same quarters that citizens receive," Rosebuds said coldly.

"Well, that sounds reasonable." Wyeth had switched personas again, and he bent over his data controls, eyes already vague with schedules and task rankings. "Rebel, why don't you get our things ferried over and squared away? I'll join you as soon as I can."

Rebel nodded, said nothing. But she lingered for a moment, studying Rosebuds. The woman released Wyeth's arm and surveyed the lobby. It was hard to tell, under that aloof citizen's programming, what she might be thinking.

"First thing, this celebration," Rosebuds said. "This unprogrammed rabble must be cleared away."

The geodesic was parked at the outskirts of a vast orbital slum anchored by Deimos. Farms, factories, tank towns and wheel hamlets swarmed about the lopsided rock that was patently no true moon but an asteroid captured by Mars eons ago. It was all junk, not a cannister city

or other major structure in the lot. Rebel caught a standup hopper, along with Stilicho and Vergillia, the one other citizen not directly involved in the decommission. The flight was long, made awkward by Stilicho's rough pilotage. Time and again he swerved abruptly to avoid some sudden manmade object. Apparently the People's Militia maintained only rudimentary traffic control.

As the hopper flew toward Deimos, pillars rose from the moon's surface, thread-thin and bright as mirrors. They soared outward hundreds of kilometers, then bent on long stems, like tornadoes, spreading slightly as they were acted on by Mars' gravitational field. "What the fuck are *those?*" Rebel asked, and then had to snatch for the grab bars as Stilicho slewed the hopper wildly away from a rising pillar.

"Dust," Stilicho grunted. He slammed the controls to the side, pulled them back as quickly.

"Pulverized rock," Vergillia added. "Tailings from our mining and tunneling operations, sent up by mass drivers. The dust is given an electrostatic charge, polarized, and then shot outward in phased pulses, on the order of seven hundred twenty per Greenwich second, a rate so fast that the flow appears continuous." The woman was warming to her subject. Rebel looked away, cutting her off. Something about that fanatic drone made her itch.

"When are you going to be programmed a citizen?" Stilicho demanded.

"You've already asked me that question three times. Why don't you just give it a rest?"

"You haven't given me a satisfactory answer yet." Stilicho waved a hand irritably. "Evasions, fluff, words that don't say anything! If you take programming as soon as we reach Deimos, you can be put to work tomorrow. A flight of ice asteroids is coming in, and the seeding crews could always use another hand." He put a holographic projection of an ice asteroid—a dirty thing, with more carbon than water to it—in the center of the hopper. A mining camp clung to the surface, and interior lines glowed, shafts, drifts, and galleries. "The small triangles represent spore packets. No bigger than your thumb, but there are hundreds of them scattered through the ice. The stars represent bacterial charges, packed in fragmentation chambers."

Rebel stared out the hopper's visor strip at the twisting columns of dust. People's Mars' mining crafts were too sophisticated for her to follow, and their biotechniques were antiquated, dating back to the beginning of the century, when the first comets had been seeded. There was no middle ground in this lecture, nothing she might be interested to hear.

Vergillia, seeing her staring at the dust columns, mistook evasiveness for interest. "You are witnessing a very elegant use of resources," she said. "The waste dust is shot out into one of two areosynchrous orbits,



where it forms mirror clouds which reflect additional sunlight down to the surface. Total insolation is thus increased by nearly ten percent."

All this while, Stilicho kept talking. "The ice asteroids approach from the leading edge of Mars, and hit the surface with the force of fusion bombs—"

"Since the orbit is not permanent, there is slow but inevitable loss of dust, which must then be replenished—"

"Not only does the impact fragment the upper regolith, but the buried bacteria and spores are distributed through the shattered permafrost by explosive—"

They were like two machines that could not be turned off. Their overlapping babblings ebbed and crested to form surges of pure abrasive noise that were all but unbearable. And through it all, that irritating quality of Vergillia's voice ran, like fingernails dragged across slate. "Shut up!" Rebel shouted. "God damn it, I don't want your programming! I'm not going to become a citizen! I despise all of you! Is that straightforward enough, or do you want me to be more explicit?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. "Well," Vergillia said at last. "Perhaps you need more time to consider."

Right then, something swam into focus in Rebel's memory and she was finally able to place Vergillia's voice. She understood why that tone of bland assurance, with just that accent delivered in just that flat cadence set her teeth on edge.

The woman sounded just like Eucrasia's mother.

The tunnels bored deep into the dead rock of Deimos were long, straight and perfectly round, drilled with simpleminded undeviancy. Even weighted down by Wyeth's dozen crates of possessions and her own two, the slight gravity made it hard to walk. They drifted deep into the moon, past lighting towers spaced so there were stretches of gloom between harsh brilliancies. Rebel felt as if she were moving through the faraway childhood her mother had so proudly hated. These were the grey and black rockscapes she had heard of so often. These rapidly-moving citizens in grey were the same people her mother had despised so guiltily.

"You will note the perfect roundness of the tunnels," Stilicho said. "All our spaces are multipurpose. What is a dormitory today may be grain storage tomorrow. A corridor may become a conduit for water or industrial chemicals, or even bacterial seed stock, depending on need. Nothing is dedicated solely to human comfort."

Eucrasia's mother had told stories of people drowning in a sudden flood of creosote or of molasses, when the citizen-comptroller operating the gates had pulled the wrong switch. Rebel glanced over her shoulder. It

was a long way to the nearest exit. "It doesn't sound like a very appealing way to live."

"You must understand that when Mars has been terraformed, we will all move to the surface, and Deimos will be abandoned. It would make no sense to waste effort on temporary quarters."

Ahead a group of noncitizens—all heavily wetpainted—were installing a failsafe gate. As Vergillia and Stilicho strode forward, the work gang scattered to get out of their way. Eucrasia's mother had also told stories of what happened to those who got in the way of programmed citizens. "When will Mars be ready, then?"

"Two hundred and eighty years."

They came to a train station. Without her guides, Rebel would not have known. To her it was just the unmarked junction of two tunnels, by which a drab crowd of citizens and a few programmed outsiders stood. Then, from a crosstube, a metal worm floated into view. Its blind front eased to a halt, and doors sighed open. Vergillia and Stilicho helped Rebel load her bundle of cartons into the freight section, and then they all entered a transit car. Rebel hooked feet and hands through the appropriate rings. The car filled to capacity.

A bell chimed, and the doors closed. The train leaped forward in a horrid burst of acceleration, and the lights went off. In the pitch darkness, with bodies pressing on her from all side, Rebel felt Eucrasia's claustrophobia rise up. "What's wrong?" she cried. "What happened to the lights?"

"Lights are not necessary here," Stilicho said. "The People never waste resources unnecessarily."

The train flew into the black and lightless rock.

Rebel was still feeling weak and a little helpless when they arrived at the day's designated dormitory niches. Some quarter of them were in use. People came and went constantly. "Diamond blue seventeen," Stilicho said. "Remember that."

"Your leader's niche is beside it. Diamond blue eighteen," Vergillia added.

"Oh, good," Rebel said. The niches were small, with a sleeping space scooped from one rock wall. The crates nearly filled one niche completely, much to her guides' amusement. "How do I close the door?"

"Door?" asked Vergillia.

Stilicho said, "Do not worry about your possessions. With a few exceptions such as yourself, all noncitizens allowed into Deimos are rigidly programmed. There is no theft here."

"I meant for privacy."

"Privacy?"

Shaking her head wearily, Rebel said, "Listen, it's been fun. Thanks

for your help. Now why don't you two just leave me alone for a while?" She sat down in the sleeping space. The rock smelled faintly of olive oil and machine lubricant. "Go away."

"Perhaps," Stilicho said in a concerned voice, "you don't understand how badly new citizens are needed for the great task—"

"My mother was a citizen," Rebel said angrily. "Did you know that?"

They looked at her.

"Yeah, she was born right here on Deimos. She was brought up in one of your creche collectives. Took citizenship at age ten. Did everything she was supposed to do, and got reprogrammed once a year. She was just like you, you know that?"

"I don't—"

But Rebel talked through the reply, driven by a near-hysteria born of exhaustion. "Here's the interesting part. She was on an ice asteroid seeding crew, just like you want me for, okay? She was on the green team, so she was in on it from the beginning. Went to Saturn orbital and was on the team that negotiated the deal with the ice butchers." The citizens were staring at her in flat amazement. "So she was your quintessential constant citizen, right? Only it's—what?—maybe a two-year trek from Saturn to Mars, even with early acceleration and a solar sail rig. So there was time for personality drift. The green team stavka thought there wasn't enough opportunity for unshared experience for individualization to occur. So they weren't vigilant enough.

"Okay, so the asteroid is passing through the belts, and there's an unscheduled breakdown. Kills half the green team. The big tunneler needs parts and a major overhaul from the nearest industrial Kluster. My mother is on the buying collective, makes the score, returns.

"One of the fitters the Kluster sent out was my father. He was a big guy, very competent, sure of himself, quiet. A hell of a guy. The kind that people admire. And my mother fell in love with him. You see that? She didn't know what was happening at first, 'cause citizens don't fall in love, right? How could they? By the time she realized what had happened, she was so far gone she didn't want to come back. He smiled at her, and she went with him. Back at the Kluster, she took industrial asylum, and the green team had to go on without her." Rebel's throat was dry. She coughed into her hand. "So you see what I'm saying? I know all about you. I heard all about your tricks when I was a kid. I know what you're selling, and I'm not buying any. Okay?"

Stilicho turned stiffly, and bounded away. Vergillia hesitated long enough to say, "I am sorry that your mother was a sex-criminal, and deprived you of your birthright. But that does not excuse you for rudeness."

Then she too was gone.

The stone was cool under Rebel's back, and vibrated with the subsonic rumble of faraway digging machines. Her stomach was queasy, and her head ached. Eucrasia's memories had come back to her totally. There was much in Eucrasia's past that she hadn't had occasion to think about, but it was all there, and accessible to her.

But along with the dead weight of Eucrasia's memories came unexpected insight. She realized now why her mother had filled her childhood with pointless droning stories about the corridors of Deimos, about quiet misery and bleak sameness and unending work. She understood her mother's sudden flares of dark anger, her randomly applied prohibitions, her sourceless punishments. They had all been her faltering, uninformed attempts to immunize Eucrasia against People's Mars. To foster a hard independence that would ensure she never returned to the moon of her mother's birth, never surrendered to its citizenship program.

And yet here she was, in these same tired old tunnels.

This is not my past, Rebel thought. This guilt is not mine. And yet lying in this doorless niche, with citizens moving briskly by and occasionally glancing in with cool impersonal curiosity, the coughs and growls of distant machines bouncing down stone walls, Rebel felt like crying.

After a while, she did.

The clamor of voices echoed about the communal dining hall. The chamber was huge, as high as it was wide, and the hundreds of tables and benches and thousands of diners didn't come near to filling it. High over Rebel's place an enormous conduit gaped, water stains trailing from its lip. Involuntarily, she glanced toward the distant entryway, wondering how many here would make it to the nearest failsafe lock were that distant citizen-comptroller to suffer a single instant's inattention.

Scattered here and there among the grey citizens, conversing, were several hundred orange Comprise (and one silent one who studied Rebel with a dead insectoid stare), and the rarer multicolored brightness of Constance's work crew. The chatter was light, and there was constant motion between tables. Wyeth slipped into the bench holes beside her. "How was your day?" Rebel asked.

"We managed to empty out the orchid, anyway." A pierrot set a tray before Wyeth, and he picked up the food tongs. "It was awful. I spent all my time keeping Little Miss Bloodthirsty from killing people. She wanted to give the orchid villagers an hour's notice, and then pump out the air."

"No!"

"What is so remarkable?" Rosebuds latched her tray to the table, and took the place beside Wyeth. Freeboy and a noncitizen Rebel didn't recognize—he wore a zebra-striped cloak and a red vest with twin rows of brass buttons—took places opposite her. "Share it with us all."

"A private joke," Wyeth said easily. "Hallo, Freeboy. Who's your friend?"

"Bors is my name, sir." Flash of white teeth. Bors' hair was done up in long, thin braids, their ends contained in silver static balls. He wore a slim, noncommittal line of yellow paint across his brow. "I am a commercial traveler in vintage information from the Republique Provisionnelle d'Amalthea, of the unaligned Jovian satellites."

Wyeth introduced himself and Rebel, and then said, "You've come a long way."

"And a long way yet to go. My coldship is bound for Earth in another day. Deimos is only a side-trip for me, a bit of mining technology transfer that was too profitable to resist."

Freeboy, who had been listening impatiently, abruptly leaned forward and said to Rebel, "Hey! You'll never guess who's taken on citizenship today. You want to try and guess?" Confused, Rebel shook her head. Freeboy leaned back, looking smug. "Your little friend Maxwell, that's who."

"Maxwell?" Rebel said. Freeboy nodded. "Slim, dark, irresponsible, hedonistic kid? Are we talking about the same guy?"

"It does seem hard to credit," Wyeth said. "This *was* voluntary, you say?"

"Oh yeah, he wanted it all right. He said—"

"This is all very interesting," Rosebuds said. "Now I have something I'd like you all to see." She slid her tray aside, and started dealing out cards from a deck of holographic flats. She laid down an image of Mars as it appeared in prehuman times, red and lifeless, then covered it with a second card. The planet wavered, then blurred with storms. The icecaps were darkened by a light dustfall of Phobic matter, and shrank. A single glint of green showed within the crater of Olympus Mons. "You see the progress we're making. The Olympus eden is a showcase microecology, a sample of what all Mars will be like eventually, and is not yet available for colonization." Swiftly she laid down further cards. "Fifty years from now, a hundred, one fifty. At this point most of the permafrost has melted, and the atmosphere is thick enough for humans equipped with rebreathers. But we will not be satisfied. Two hundred years." Mottled green covered the floating sphere. There were thin clouds. "Three hundred." The entire planet was transformed. Gentle green stretched from polar region to polar region. Here and there tiny lakes were pinpricks of glacial blue.

"You will note that there are no oceans. The Martian ecology will be more delicate and at the same time more supportive of human life than the Terran ecology. While the oceans of Earth make its ecosphere incredibly stable, they also waste most of Earth's resources on marine life.

The total colonizable land area of Mars will be equal to that of Earth, and it will all be put to the service of the People."

"I really don't see the benefit of terraforming a planet," Rebel said dubiously. "For that kind of effort you could build thousands of city cans, or seed I don't know how many comets."

"A planetary surface is the best place for an expanding postindustrial culture. The air is free, to begin with. There is so much land area that it wouldn't be worth the effort to charge rent. You'd just live wherever you wanted. Croplands in a functioning ecosphere are self-irrigating, and self-fertilizing. In fact, everything takes vastly less effort on a planetary surface." She laid down another series of cards. "Here is a vision of the croplands. Here is a vision of the treelands. Here is a vision of one of the larger lakes. The opposite shore is barely visible, it is so large. Within the lake will be fish, eels, mussels. On its verges, rice, wetwheat, cranberries. Here is a vision of the parklands . . ."

"That's a really primitive structure you got there," Freeboy said. "You've got a one-to-one transference of Terran ecologies, you see? But with a little thought you could adapt ocean fish, squids, maybe revert a few land plants to lakeweeds, set up a lichen bridge across the surface, and before you know it you've got a much more interesting and complex system going. Why haven't your people whomped up something like that?"

"Look about you," Rosebuds said. "How many plants do you see? We cannot afford to devote resources to the support industries a bioengineering economy requires. And yet, as you say, the need is great. You will find that there is much for you to do when you take on citizenship."

"No, no, not me!" Freeboy held up his hands, laughing. "I'm going back to Hibrasil with all the money I earned on this swing through the System, and then some. Matter of fact, I just made a bundle on the currency exchange today."

"You didn't exchange outside currency for People's credit?" Bors looked concerned.

"Is there a problem?" Freeboy asked, the smile dying on his face.

"Our social systems are built to support the ideal of the selfless, communal citizen," Rosebuds said. "Since the amassing of private wealth is destructive to the personality, we have ways of discouraging it. That is why, for example, we are assigned new living quarters daily. When you have to move all that you own once a day, you learn to retain only that which has true value. Similarly, our economy has an engineered inflation rate of ten thousand percent daily."

Freeboy turned to Bors. "What does that mean?"

"It means that People's credit has to be spent immediately. Otherwise it disappears. If you've held on to it for an hour, it's practically worthless."

Freeboy stood, pale with outrage. "I—" He shook a finger at Wyeth. "All I went through working for you! And—I—" He choked and, turning away, fled.

Turning over another card, Rosebuds said, "This is a vision of the living quarters we will share in the new civilization."

Wyeth reached out, put a hand over the cards. "What I'd really like to talk about is your attitude toward the Comprise. I've been watching, and it's obvious to me that you're not taking proper precautions against them. I've even seen some using your data ports. You obviously have no appreciation of how dangerous they are."

"The People cannot be in danger," Rosebuds said, "since we cannot be corrupted." She swept up her holographic flats and stood. "I can see, however, that none of you has a true interest in citizenship as yet. We shall discuss the matter further at a later time." She left, and two more citizens came along to take her place, and the one beside it.

"Have you used the facilities here yet?" Bors asked Rebel, smiling.

"Oh, God! The first time I sat down on a crapper and a man came up and sat down beside me, I almost died. And then he saw me turning red, and wanted to know what the problem was." Rebel laughed, and Bors and Wyeth joined her.

The citizens looked puzzled. "I don't understand," one said, and when Rebel tried to explain, "But where is the humor in that?"

Rebel simply shook her head.

A few minutes later the new citizens took their trays and left. "People come and go so quickly around here," Rebel marveled.

"That's because mealtime is the only chance they get to socialize," Bors said. "Every hour of their day is spent constructively. If they're not working, they're studying. If they're not working or studying, they're asleep. This is the only chance they get to simply talk."

"You seem to know a lot about the subject."

"Yes, I do, don't I?" Bors said, pleased.

When Rebel led Wyeth back to diamond blue seventeen, he glanced quickly at his crates and said, "Snug, isn't it?" Then, in his warrior voice: "Listen, I want to do a little poking around in the public data base, see how thoroughly the Comprise have infiltrated it. Why don't you wait here for me? I won't be long."

Rebel knew better than to argue with Wyeth's warrior persona. She sat down in the sleepspace. There was nothing to do here save listen to the constant light-gravity scuffle of citizens in the hall. After ten minutes of that she began to appreciate the motivating power of boredom. Given the chance, she would gladly have volunteered to scrape vacuum flowers, just to have something to do.

Rosebuds appeared in the doorway. She stood there silently, her cloak open.

"He's not here," Rebel said grimly. "And you can't have him, anyway."

Doffing her cloak, Rosebuds stepped within. She left her boots by the door and sat beside Rebel. "I didn't come here for him." She put a hand on Rebel's knee. "The Stavka is very concerned about you. I informed them that you were brought up by a renegade, and they were worried that this may have made you anti-sex, possessive, and private." Her hand slid up Rebel's thigh.

The woman's tone was so matter-of-fact that it was not until she started to peel away Rebel's *cache-sexe* that Rebel realized what she was talking about. With a startled cry she cringed back in the sleepspace, tugging her clothing up, and raising knees to chin so that her legs formed a barrier between them. "Hey! Wait a minute, I'm not into that kind of—"

"We could tell," Rosebuds said. "That is one reason we sent you a woman. To help in your healing. You are depriving yourself of many modes of pleasure needlessly."

"Yeah, well, Wyeth will be back in a minute, so maybe you'd better go."

"There's room for him as well. Perhaps that would be the quickest way of freeing you from your possessiveness." She raised a leg and gently ran her foot up the side of Rebel's body, tweaking her earlobe between first and second toes. "Pleasure is communal. Relax. Enjoy yourself."

"But I don't want to enjoy myself!" Rebel cried. "Not that way! All I want is Wyeth and . . . and . . ."

"This isn't working," Rosebuds said scornfully. "Look at you. You are so fearful. Do you think I am going to take you by force? Let me tell you something, I see you sneer at the great dream of terraforming, and at the People. You think our lives are constricted, but they are not half so narrow as your own. The citizenship program makes us full human beings. A citizen understands duty, sex, work, pleasure, friendship, and sacrifice, and welcomes them all. I have been down to the surface five times, and that is a very dangerous place. I have been as close to death as I am to you now, and I never once showed fear. You laugh at the People because we are all the same. But we are heroes, every one of us. I am one, and I know!"

She pulled on her boots and left.

When Wyeth returned, they made love. It was a sweaty, desperate lovemaking, and Rebel put all she had into it. I am *not* afraid, she told herself, and I am not missing any pleasure. At the moment of climax, as she squeezed Wyeth tight inside her, and dug her nails so deeply into

the flesh of his back that they drew blood, he groaned into her ear, "I love you."

"Hah? What?" she said blankly.

"I love you." Lying weak and exhausted beside her, Wyeth brushed her cheek with his own. "I really do."

"What are you talking about?" This was all too ludicrous to be real. "Which one of you? Or should I say, how many?"

"Listen to me." Wyeth rolled atop her, gazed straight into her eyes. "I . . . don't think that love is a matter of persona, of personality. I think it goes deeper than that." His fist thumped his chest. "*I* love you, Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark. I think I would love you no matter who I was."

Silent and unblinking, Rebel looked at him until she felt her eyes sliding out of focus, and blinked and had to say something. "Why are you telling me this now?"

She didn't accent that last word, but it hovered between them, cold and harsh as truth itself. There couldn't be much time left to her. Eucrasia's memories had returned, and the persona could not be far behind. And then Rebel would be melted down, back into the ocean of soul, and exist no more. "Why now?" she repeated. Maybe it didn't matter to him who she was—Rebel or Eucrasia. Bitter thought.

He read her eyes. "It's not Eucrasia. It's not this body. There will never be anyone for me but you. Listen. I know that you're . . . going away soon, and I don't want you to—God, I don't know how to say it—I don't want you to *dissolve* without ever knowing that I love you. I don't think I could bear it. Is that too greedy of me? Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

In a storm of happiness and misery, she hugged him to her, and held him tight so that he couldn't see her face, her tears. When he started to talk again, she silenced him the only way she could think of, and they were making love again.

All through it, she loved him so much she had to bite her tongue to keep from telling him. She was afraid that if she spoke the words they would split her wide open. She loved Wyeth more now than she ever had, and she loved him most of all for lying to her. Because of course she didn't believe a word of what he'd said.

But it was nice that he'd said it.

That night Eucrasia appeared to her in the form of a rotting corpse. Her fingers ended in chrome scalpels, and when she opened her mouth, hypodermic syringes slid from the flesh like rows of lamprey teeth. "Go back," Rebel said. Eucrasia raised a grey hand in graceful gesture, and razor tracks stung across Rebel's face.

For a shocked instant, Rebel stood her ground, staring through a haze

of blood globules, and then Eucrasia lifted her other hand, and Rebel turned and kicked away.

She fled down an endless tangle of stone tunnels, falling up some and struggling down others. Time and again the necromantic horror behind her reached out lazily to slash the soles of her feet. She was trailing blood, and throbbed with pain from the knees downward. It seemed to her that she was fleeing through the arteries of a vast body, a dead body, a body of dead stone, and that the body was her own. With this insight, she found herself paralyzed and strapped to a gurney within a niche of New High Kamden's rose maze.

Eucrasia's face loomed over her. The wetsurgical paint was cracked and dry, the cheeks taut, and the mouth slightly agape with the tightening of the flesh. Eyes dry and sightless. She leaned close and, breath sweet with putrefaction, spoke.

But when Rebel finally awoke, all she could remember was that Eucrasia had told her truths that she dared not accept.

Chapter Ten: SHADOW OF SNOW

The next day somebody shot a citizen.

Rebel didn't hear of it until dinnertime. She'd been strawbossing a work crew fitting a new airlock on Tank Fourteen. It was one of a dozen crews, all but hers overseen by citizens, that Wyeth was coordinating, but the others were all off on the hull or in the orchid. Half the hustlers in the tanks came out to sell her workers spiced fruit, wine, ganja, or bootie, and it was a constant hassle keeping them out of the way. The day before, the macrobioengineers had killed the orchid and it was starting to liquesce. Even through the rebreathers needed now that half the air had been pumped from the geodesic, the stench was appalling. It was late when she finally got the lock working, and she was barely in time to catch a hopper to Deimos. She stepped into the bench as Wyeth was finishing his meal.

"Citizen got shot today," Wyeth said. He gave her a hug, handed her a tray. A passing pierrot filled it with food.

"What happened?"

"The crew that was chopping the orchid for the protein refineries? They stumbled across a nest of bootleggers brewing up absinthe gin. Pretty marginal operation, I'd say, or they would've written that last batch off. Anyway, one of them had an air rifle. It went off." He shrugged. "These things happen."

"Was he hurt bad?"

"Here he comes now." Two citizens took places at their table. One wore

a chest sling, and Rebel could see the prosthetic lung moving within its amber depths. "Hallo, Cincinnatus. How's the prognosis?"

"No permanent damage done," Cincinnatus said.

"I am curious," the woman beside him said. "This air rifle, is it a common weapon in the belt Klusters?"

"No, no," Wyeth said. "In fact, it's extremely impractical in most Kluster environments—more a toy than a weapon. Its range is greater than a blade's, but its accuracy is less. It's cheaper than energy weapons, but less versatile. However, there does seem to be something of a fad for the things in the tanks."

Three more citizens came by, with Bors tagging after. He sat beside Rebel, braids swimming lazily about his head, then slowly settling down. The static balls kept them away from his face. "This is my last supper." He spread his hands to either side of him. "My coldship is being prepped even as we sit here."

"And yet, as you say, this weapon seems peculiarly well suited to the needs of petty criminals. Why did you introduce it in the first place?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Wyeth said lightly. His questioner frowned.

Stilicho also joined the group. "I've been out examining the damage done by the weeds that came along with the sheraton. These vacuum flowers. I found them growing on tanks, on farm exteriors, on vacuum docks—there is even a patch on the surface of Deimos. They seem to be everywhere."

"Oh they're tenacious all right," Wyeth said. "Once they get a toehold, there's no getting rid of them." Bors chewed slowly, watching the exchange with bright interest. "Speaking of unwanted presences, Stilicho, I was browsing through your public data base yesterday, and found it riddled with Comprise incursions. I hope you don't keep any secrets there."

"The People have no secrets," Stilicho said. "Freedom of information is a basic right of our society. About these vacuum flowers of yours. How are they controlled on Eros Kluster?"

"Mostly they're not. They're kept down by dint of constant labor, but I couldn't say that they're controlled. The problem is that they're bioconstructs designed for trash transformation. The idea was that it'd be easier to harvest and process the flowers than pick up and process the trash. Somebody explained to me once how they got out of hand. Something about single-organism ecosystems. I forget the details."

"Do you know any People's law?" Bors asked abruptly.

"I've seen something of it," Rebel said.

"The geodesic should have been examined before acceleration. These verminous little plants will cost us enormous effort to exterminate—if

they can indeed be exterminated. Seeding our space with their spores was criminal negligence," Stilicho said.

"Somebody goofed, that's for sure," Wyeth agreed. "Similarly, I think you'll be making a mistake if you don't sterilize your data system as soon as you can."

"Fascinating stuff. Very informal, very final. Once judgment has been made, there's no appeal," Bors said. "Their trials are held at mealtime. A few members of the Stavka gather at the suspect's table and ask questions. Witnesses drop by to chat, then wander off. By the time the meal is over—" he impaled seven peas on an eating needle and popped them in his mouth—"the guilty party has been condemned. And if he wasn't paying attention, he might well have mistaken it all for casual dinner conversation."

Rebel glanced quickly at Wyeth. The expression on his face was suddenly careful. "Of course I myself had nothing to do with the exterior of the hull," he said, "since I was responsible solely for *internal* security."

"A legalism," Stilicho said.

Cincinnatus shook his head. "No, that's a valid point. What I'm concerned with are all these rifles loose in the tanks. I believe they could well grow into a major social problem given time. It would—"

"Have you ever eaten meat?" Bors asked Rebel loudly. "I don't mean fish or termite compress, but real meat. Dead flesh, carved from animal corpses."

Rebel stared at him blankly and he jabbed her with his thumb. "People used to eat rabbits, I know," she faltered. "And chickens."

"They still do in the Outer System. Had it myself. Dead chicken is mighty fine eating."

Several citizens glanced at Bors with distaste. Wyeth leaned forward and said, "I understand that on Earth people used to eat the major mammals. Horses, cows, bears, apes."

"Apes?" Cincinnatus said, horrified.

"Cows were more common, I believe. The cooks prepared them by hand, first killing the cow with a blow to the head with a large hammer. The animal grunts, the knees buckle, and there's your food."

"I do not think this conversation is necessary," Stilicho said. "Certainly not while people are eating."

"Oh, but there's more!" Bors said. "Did you know that the internal organs were considered delicacies—the liver, the heart, the brains? You'd be surprised how little there is of a dead animal that you can't eat. The pizzle was boiled and served on a bun. The stomach was crammed with a stuffing made of the minor organs, roasted and then sliced—there's irony for you, eh?" Two citizens, faces pale, put down their utensils and fled. "Now the way they prepared lobster—this is especially interest-

ing—they placed the creatures, still alive, in a large pot of cold water, then put a flame beneath the pot. Very slowly they brought the water to a boil. At first the lobster would skitter about, trying to escape, but then as the water heated up, its motions slowed, and it died. When it was bright red, it was ready. To eat it, you had to crack the shell open and suck the dead meat out."

Now Stilicho was the only citizen left, and he too looked nauseated. "We will continue our discussion tomorrow," he said to Wyeth. Then, looking at Bors, he added, "Without you."

"Did you notice how many members of the Stavka were here at our table?" Bors asked when they were alone. He tonged up a square of grub loaf. "I felt quite honored."

Rising, Wyeth bowed formally and said, "I am in your debt, sir—I don't know when I've found conversation more valuable. But right now I have business to see to. Rebel, where are we sleeping today? I'll meet you there in an hour or so."

"It's still diamond blue seventeen. Apparently guests get special privileges."

Wyeth gone, Rebel turned to her meal again, and found she had no appetite. She pushed the food about on her tray, but could not bring herself to place it in her mouth. She was about to excuse herself when Bors, leaning forward for a slice of papaya, murmured in her ear, "The *Pequod* leaves in an hour. If you caught me before I left Mars' sunspace, I could cut you a deal for transit to Earth orbit." He settled back and winked. "Think about it."

Halfway to diamond blue seventeen, a god-head, eyes luminous, stumbled up to Rebel and handed her a card. His paint was smeared across his face, but it had obviously begun as a green triangle. To Rebel his mere existence was a revelation. It implied an entire underworld of vices in Deimos, hidden away from public view. With an ecstatic wail, the god-head broke away from her and trotted up the corridor, turned aside, and was gone.

Rebel looked down at the card. It was blank. Wonderingly, she ran a thumb across its surface. There must have been an empathic contact circuit layered onto the paper, for a voice whispered within her head, "go to a public data port and place your hand against the screen." A quick, almost subliminal flash of a large black wheel hung in the air. She recognized the logo.

Earth.

Rebel ran her thumb over the card again, but nothing happened. The bit of more-than-human technology had destroyed itself.

This was exactly Wyeth's kind of opportunity. Doubtless he'd have

two-edged bargains ready to offer, and poisoned concessions to make. In some neat little mental drawer, he'd have his baits fresh, his hooks sharpened, and his lines coiled. His arguments would be finer than a hair, almost invisible and yet stronger than diamond-whisker cable.

No matter. It was all irrelevant now.

Rebel was not about to follow up on the card. She had troubles enough of her own. But when she came to the intersection of tunnels down which the god-head had run, she glanced down it casually and saw him being beaten by a knot of citizens.

Two citizens were holding the man against the curve of the wall, while two others systematically pounded his stomach, his face, his chest, with their fists. They worked in grim silence, and the god-head did not cry out. Despite the damage done him, he grinned weakly. "Hey!" Rebel cried. "Stop that!" The citizens looked up. She felt vaguely foolish, as if they had caught her at wrongdoing, rather than the other way around, but she ran toward them anyway.

The citizens' faces were stolid. Their victim's head lolled down against his chest, and he chuckled weakly. One citizen stepped forward, hands upraised to block Rebel's way. "Go back," he said. "This is no concern of yours."

"Maxwell," she said wonderingly. "Maxwell, is that you?"

The citizen glanced over his shoulder at his fellows, then took her arm and started walking her away. She resisted at first, but then Maxwell said, "Think. There's nothing you can do."

They turned a corner and walked on in silence. After a time, Rebel said, "This isn't like you, Maxwell." He smiled ironically. "I don't see how you could have done this to yourself! You were always light. Carefree."

"Irresponsible," Maxwell said. "Yes, I know. I enjoyed it at the time. But I grew. Everybody grows." They strolled along somberly, and then he said, "What did it for me was when I was snatched by King Wismon. He didn't just throw me in with his rude boys—he made me their zookeeper. Practically his second in command. Think of that. It was the first time I'd ever been put in charge of anything. And you know what? I enjoyed it. Not the work itself, but the sense of being responsible. Of being an adult. That's what citizenship gives me. They're sending me down to the surface tomorrow."

"Maxwell, you were beating that man! That's not being responsible. That's just plain vicious."

Maxwell thought for a long time before speaking. "Duty doesn't always make you feel good. That citizen will be reprogrammed, but the memory still remains. He must remember that there was pain as well as pleasure." They were now a good distance from the site of the beating. "But as I

said, it's none of your concern. Your dormitory area is just ahead. Third corridor right, straight on to the end. You can't miss it."

Rebel stood there as this new stranger turned and started to walk away. It was such a pathetic moment she wished she could slice it out of her memory entirely. All his ravings about responsibility. "Maxwell?"

He stopped, glanced back casually. "Yes?"

"Where's the nearest public data port?"

Smooth white niche. She touched fingers to the plate and a holoscreen flickered on. Against a formless background a woman knelt on a red prayer rug, gaunt in white cloak. She raised her head and studied Rebel through cold, colorless eyes.

"Snow?" Rebel asked.

The image considered this. "No. Not Snow. I am her shadow."

"You are . . . Shadow?"

A quick snakelike motion of the head, a fractional smile. "Shadow, yes. That is a good name for me. Call me Shadow. I am a message for you. Snow believes it may take some discussion to convince you that your interests and hers lie in the same direction. Yet no members of her network were within easy interactive distance of you. Thus, she created me."

"I don't understand. What *are* you?"

"I am an interactive ALI, that's Artificial Limited Intelligence. A temporary avatar based on the Snow persona. I have full human awareness, and can discuss a limited number of topics with you. However, I am not provided with irrelevant information, and cannot respond to irrelevant remarks. Please keep that fact in mind as we talk."

"So you don't know from eating dead animals, you mean?"

"You exceed this program's capabilities." Shadow made an impatient gesture. "We haven't much time. ALI's are created with an inherent disintegration factor. What programmers call a virus. I will die soon, whether my message is delivered or not." A flicker of emotion within those reptilian eyes. Rebel thought she could guess at its nature.

"How long do you have?" she asked gently.

"We have already wasted one third of my life."

"Okay, all right, I got you! What's the message?"

"You must take extreme care when you enter your niche. Diamond blue seventeen. There is a body there. It may not be entirely dead."

"What?" Rebel touched the wall with one hand. Cool and rough. Its solidity reassured her. "I don't—"

"This is Snow's warning: You are being manipulated by the Comprise. You and your friend tetrad. They have convinced the Stavka that you are corporate agents, industrial saboteurs. They have created plausible

and incriminating theories for all your actions. They have planted evidence. The body is such evidence. It will be discovered in six hours, and it will dovetail neatly into other planted evidence. Data system records will show that the murder could only have been done by you. The Stavka will order your personas erased, and your bodies condemned to simple labor."

"Wait, wait! This doesn't make any sense."

"The important thing is to remember that the body may not be entirely dead. The murder was difficult to arrange, even for the Comprise, and there's a good chance the victim will still be alive when you enter. If so, he will probably be extremely dangerous."

"This is incredible. Dangerous in what way? Why?"

"You have exceeded this program's capabilities." Shadow waited a full two seconds, then said, "Do you have any further questions?"

"No. No, I—think not."

"Please consider carefully. I do not have long. If you have illusions of destroying the evidence or of successfully defending yourself before the Stavka, please let me know, so I can convince you it cannot be done. I have been given that information." The image wavered as a front of white static washed through it. "I have been given that information." A pale, attenuated yearning touched her face. "You must interact with me. It is very hard knowing one must die, but worse to die for no purpose."

"All right, then. Speaking of purpose. Why is the Comprise doing this to me? What's in it for them?"

"You are being forced to run. You will find that there is no place for you to hide anywhere in Mars orbit. A check of the port control manifests will reveal that the only vessels leaving in the next six hours are all bound for Earth orbit. The Comprise wants to force you to Earth. I do not know why."

"I do," Rebel said grimly. "I understand it all now. I just don't have the slightest idea what to do about it."

Transients pulsed through Shadow, making her waver as if seen from deep underwater. When she stabilized, she said, "I am almost over. Tell me. Have I served you well? Have I helped you to escape the Comprise's manipulations?"

"You stupid program! Snow works for the Comprise. She doesn't want to help me escape them. She just wants to be sure that I fall into their trap intact."

"Ah," Shadow said. "That's interesting. Very—" Static rose up and overwhelmed the image.

When it cleared, Shadow was gone.

One corner of the sleepspace was visible from the hall, and in it a pair

of legs, unnaturally still. Rebel forced herself to peer within. The man's cloak was thrown up over his head, and his torso was bright with blood. An ugly smear covered the stone behind him. Feeling cold, Rebel said, "Hello?"

The cloak stirred as an arm caught in its folds moved feebly. The end of the arm jutted from the cloth, a stump black with crusted blood. Just above the stump was a tourniquet, and above that a crudely made infection barrier. Even from the doorway, Rebel caught the whiff of decaying flesh.

The arm moved twice, trying to flip the cloak away, and then on a third attempt succeeded, uncovering a face that was grey and gape-mouthed. Pink eyelids slowly rose, and the man drew in a long, shuddering breath.

Haunted eyes stared at her.

It was Jerzy Heisen, and he was dying.

"Hey, kid," he said weakly. "We've come a long way, you and I."

The halls were perfectly silent. Not even a digging machine to be heard. Apparently she and Wyeth were the only ones using these dormitories today. Rebel wanted to untangle Heisen's cloak, to straighten his limbs and put him at ease. She didn't move from the doorway. "What happened, Jerzy?"

Eyes closed wearily. "Stupid. Stupid freak accident, couldn't happen again if you tried." He coughed spasmodically; it was some time before he could speak again. "I was clipped by a runaway cybermop. Pretty dumb, huh? Supervisor must not've been at the monitors—they execute people for that kind of mistake here. Should never've happened. I fell on top of the sucker and one of the cleaning arms broke loose and slammed me in here. Bet it made a bloody mess, huh?" Rebel nodded. "So now my back's fucked, you wouldn't want to look at it. I think my spine is crushed."

"I'll get a doctor," Rebel said. She couldn't move.

"No good." Eyes opened, infinitely sad. "Got myself wired together with seven caps of jolt. That's enough to make a corpse walk. Dose like that eats your body alive." He laughed weakly. "Seven caps. Must be some kind of record. Listen to me. I'm drugged and I'm dying, and I think maybe it's shorted out the compulsion they laid on me. There's something I got to tell you. Something they don't want you to know."

"Oh yeah?" Rebel said. "What is it?"

"It's important. Deutsche Nakaso—" His voice slid down into inaudibility, but Rebel didn't lean any closer to hear. After a moment's silence, Heisen stirred slightly and rasped, "Come closer. Can't—can't speak too good."

"No."

"S'important." Heisen coughed again, and tears of agony came to his eyes. "Mus' tell."

"Oh, come off it. I'm not going to fall for that."

"Closer," he whispered.

Slowly Rebel slid down the doorframe, until she was sitting on the floor. She leaned her back against the stone, crossed her arms under her breasts, said nothing. Heisen glared at her.

There was something savage and desperate to that fixed stare, as if the mind behind those eyes were a small animal caught in a leghold snare and about to gnaw its way free. "So," he said at last. "So. You think . . . you're such a smart bitch." He lurched feebly, and the arm caught under his body yanked free of the cloak. He was holding a finger-blade between second and third knuckles. With a spasmodic motion, he threw the thing right at her. Rebel leaned back, and the blade sailed by.

A second later it made a gentle metal *ping* against the rock wall.

The outstretched arm pointed straight at her. Heisen didn't have the strength to pull it back. "Smart," he said. "But that doesn't give you the right to do this to me."

Rebel drew her feet under her, stood. She felt anger fill her body. "The right to—! I never wanted to know you in the first place. What do you want from me? Are you hoping I'm feeling suicidal? Do you want me to bring you your knife and stand real close so you can cut my throat, is that it?" She was trembling.

Heisen nodded piteously. "Please."

"Fuck that noise!"

Finally Heisen closed his eyes. Still his hand reached out desperately, grasping at nothing. His head lolled back. "You and Deutsche Nakasone," he said. "Between the two of you, I've been ground into dust. You've killed me, and I never gave a shit for either of you." His voice was growing weak.

"Hey, now listen—"

"God damn you," he whispered. "God damn you all."

They caught up with Bors just an hour inside Mars' sunspace. Rebel kept expecting pursuit, but there was none. Apparently nobody had noticed the hopper was gone. Even so, the hours at 2.5 Greenwich made it a rough trip. You could steal anything on Deimos, except for heavy gravity couches. There were none to be had. Apparently citizens were expected to simply stand and take it.

When they matched speeds with the *Pequod,* Rebel shook her head at the visual. "Is that it?"

"It certainly is a sight," Wyeth agreed.

Perched on the end of the pushrod of a Workhorse-class disposable

fusion tug was the oddest structure Rebel had ever seen. It looked something like a storybook Queen Anne house, all gingerbread and elaboration, but a Queen Anne house such as might be built in freefall by a madman. The turrets and projecting pavilions, bays, verandas, and octagonal roofs were all jumbled together and sticking out every which way. Rebel searched among the fishscale shingles, eyelid dormers, and widow's walks for a way in. Somewhere under that facade there must be a coldship. "Where do you think the airlock is?" she asked.

"See that Tudor arch portico?" Wyeth asked. "The one with the stained glass fanlight? That must be it."

"Hah? Why?"

"It has a brass nameplate by the door." He instructed the hopper to mate with the *Pequod,* wait ten minutes, and then kick away to fall back into a recovery orbit. "Let's grab our things."

The airlock opened on a room rich with furnishings—tapestries on walls, framed woodcuts set into a paneled ceiling, and all-gravity furniture everywhere. Bors looked up from a chair by the fireplace, and put down a book. "I thought that might be you. Come in, sit down. Let me help you with those crates." He sniffed. "Do I smell organics?"

Wyeth separated out two crates. "These will need to be soft-frozen. The rest can be stored anywhere."

"Storage, please." Cupboard doors twinkled open, and a minute later everything was secure. Rebel and Wyeth hung their cloaks in a closet by the door. "Welcome to my humble abode."

Rebel sat in a chair, slid her legs through the holes and leaned back. "It's lovely," she said. The fireplace was covered with climbing ivy. Water trickled down it, over bricks and leaves, to be collected at the bottom. There it was broken into hydrogen and oxygen, and the gases fed into the fire, where they burned merrily. The water vapor was drawn up the flue, chilled, and left to trickle down the bricks again. Rebel had never seen such a thing before; it was hypnotic to watch.

In the privacy of his ship, Bors wore not only his vest, but also a pair of green culottes and purple knee-socks. He was almost as aggressively covered as a dyson worlder. "Should I take my clothes off?" he asked solicitously. "Would that make you feel more at ease?"

"Oh, we're cosmopolitan enough," Wyeth said. He settled into a chair, idly examined a set of plastic Napoleonic footsoldiers embedded in a display table beside him. "You could wrap yourself head to foot in linen, and we wouldn't blink an eye."

"So long as you mean that," Bors said. "Oh, and you both do realize that we have less than an hour's gravity left? If either of you wants to take a shower . . ."

Rebel looked up. "Shower?"

* * *

Rebel felt a lot better after showering. Relaxed and comfortable. She dried and dressed, and walked back through the dark paneled hallway to the parlor. A pair of side passages into distant parts of the coldship beckoned, and she was sorry there wasn't the time to explore. Ahead, she could hear the two men, already talking like old friends.

Bors and Wyeth were discussing war and literature.

"What you have to understand is the extreme speed with which the technology blossomed," Bors said. "When Earth first became conscious, it used all its resources to spread the technology as efficiently as possible. The first transceiver was implanted in March, let's say, and all Earth was integrated by Christmas. The first clear notion anybody off-planet had of what had actually happened was when the warcraft were launched. Like a swarm of hornets bursting out of a well right into their faces, as the humorist put it."

Moving her chair a smidge closer to the fire, Rebel sat down and drew her knees to her chin. She hugged her legs, feeling warm and comfortable and quiet, and watched the firelight play on Wyeth's face.

"Yes, but that's irrelevant. There were hundreds of millions of people living off-planet at that time. You can't tell me that they didn't take their literature with them. If anything was lost in the wars, it was probably too minor to be worth recovering. The idea of major literary works waiting to be found—well, that's pure fantasy."

"No, no, we're talking about an extremely uncultured period of history. The first century of emigrants weren't exactly Earth's finest, after all. And romantic fiction didn't come back into vogue until the colonization of the Outer System. Believe me, when you're stuck in a tiny ship for months at a time without coldpacking—that's when you appreciate Anthony Trollope. The pity is that by then half his works were lost."

"But the best were preserved. Those that people actually cared enough about to read."

"Not necessarily. Keep in mind that a hundred-fifty years ago, most data were kept electronically, and that the data systems were the first things hit by Earth. In that initial month of war, before Earth retreated back to its own surface, it injected AI's into every significant data net in the Inner System. They all had to be crashed. There are even some who say that without Wang and Malenkov—"

"I believe that Malenkov himself was an artificial intelligence."

"But a patriot."

"Oh, certainly."

"Well, anyway—"

Rebel hooked her chin over her knees, let her head fall a little to one side, and listened contentedly. She felt happy and cozy and wistfully sad

all at the same time. Savoring the fireplace's warmth, she let the words wash over her in a homey, meaningless babble that rose and fell in soft familiar cadence. This was nice. Stop, she thought. Let this moment linger forever.

"Here's a sample of what I mean," Bors said. "Listen:

> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.
> Nice stuff, eh?"

"It's terrific. But your point is?"

"That's from Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. But the only surviving version of that poem is exactly fourteen lines long, a descriptive fragment containing none of what I quoted. The critical work that scholars dug the darkling plain fragment from said that it was a major poem. You'd never know that from what we have." Bors sighed. "It would make my career if I could recover the original."

Wyeth laughed and held up his hands. "I surrender! You're absolutely right. There are doubtless thousands of manuscripts squirreled away in the dusty nooks of Earth that contain lost treasures. New Shakespearian tragedies, volumes of Bashu's haiku, the complete *Iliad*, the interactive for Kpomassie's essays on cultural responsibility."

"Now, I didn't actually claim . . ." A soft chime sounded, and the fire went out. The water stopped, and the entire fireplace slid into the wall and was covered by enameled panels. "Look at the time! We're entering public sunspace now. Brace yourselves."

And then, right on cue, the fusion tug burned out, and gravity cut off. In a swift, giddy instant of disorientation, Rebel lost all concept of up and down. A gentle noise puffed through the coldship as the lightsail deployed. Rebel's stomach lurched, and she had to swallow back the vomit to keep from throwing up. Her fingers clutched the chair tightly, and that helped to steady her. And then, of course, she was okay again. She released the chair, and floated over it.

"Well," Bors said. "Since we haven't the food, oxygen, or inclination to do otherwise, it's time. I must say I'm sorry to interrupt this conversation, but perhaps it can be resumed a few months from now in Earth orbit. Coffins, please." Gently, three black coldpack boxes rose from one floor. Rebel looked at them with something akin to panic.

She wasn't ready to go under yet, was the thing. To sleep away the months between planets.

To die.

As a persona bum—and Eucrasia had been a good one—she knew that her identity wouldn't survive coldpacking. There was that moment on revival, the merest instant, when the mind didn't know itself. Perfectly

free of yearning and ego, it tottered on nothingness and then grabbed for identity, and was itself again. Tests had been run, and the results were always the same. When there were two or more identities to choose from, the strongest one always won. By wetdesign standards strength was measured by connections to memory.

And Eucrasia's memories were complete now.

Wyeth turned to Rebel, started to say something. She shook her head, and he fell silent. She could see by the stiffness of his expression that he too had been ignoring the realities. Pretending that this moment would never arrive. He did not rise from his chair.

"Am I missing something?" Bors asked, looking from face to face.

Neither answered him. Rebel turned away and kicked over to the furthest coffin. She examined its fittings, slid open the lid. "Sunshine . . ." Wyeth began in a choked voice.

"Don't."

She slipped into the coldpack unit and lay down. The padding was stiff and grey, and the workings crowded in about her. She wriggled slightly, shoved back a coil of cabling that was digging into one hip. She didn't look at Wyeth at all.

She wanted to say to him that it had been fun. That she loved him. That she didn't regret . . . Well, she wasn't sure about that one at all. She regretted a lot of things. But she knew that if she once started talking, she'd never be able to stop.

Most of all she wished she could at least kiss him goodbye.

It was probably best this way. To go cleanly and suddenly, rather than to waste away with a slow rot that didn't show until its work was done and everything that was Rebel had been eaten away, leaving nothing behind but a woman who wasn't her.

All she had to do was to close the lid. The needles would enter her then, in five places, the sudden sting of pain chilling down almost instantly into numbness, and then spreading. The crash jelly would flood in, and she would hold her breath for as long as possible, and then open her mouth and breathe in the jelly and choke, and then . . . no more.

She looked up then, against all her will, and saw Wyeth's face. It was rigidly contained, but underneath she could see the pain and horror. She thought he was going to cry.

One hand rose ever so slightly toward her. He started to lean forward. She knew that if Wyeth were to touch her, however lightly, she would break into a million fragments.

Rebel reached up and slammed the lid shut. ●

CONCLUDED IN NEXT ISSUE

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Ship Ahoy

The Forever Man

By Gordon R. Dickson
Ace Books, $16.95

The humans and the Laagi have shared a frontier in deep space for two hundred years. Perhaps shared is not the right word, since it has been open warfare ever since first contact, and the frontier is that point past which neither side has been able to push. And while humans have been captured, no Laagi has ever been seen by a human; their ships self-destruct if there is any danger of capture. No contact has been made, and often Laagi behavior (in the limited areas humanity can observe, i. e., attack or retreat) is inexplicable—in fact, downright alien.

At the beginning of Gordon R. Dickson's new novel, *The Forever Man*, a robot drone has spotted a most unlikely object deep within Laagi space. It is an antique human ship; it is, in fact, one that had taken part in one of the earliest of space battles, almost two centuries earlier. And there are indications that the pilot still is aboard. Now human longevity has been extended, but not *that* extended. Space fighter Jim Wander is sent to see the antique vessel safe out of enemy territory, taking as gunner Mary Gallegher, whose specialty is geriatrics but who also just happens to be a whizzo marksman.

The two get the old ship back (not without a few brief encounters with the Laagi), and it turns out that the pilot is not *aboard* the ship, he *is* the ship. Due to an odd set of scientific and psychic circumstances, the personality of the pilot has been absorbed into the substance of his vessel, though by this time his personality is (not surprisingly) quite bonkers.

Jim is brainwashed by his superiors and by Mary into becoming part of *his* ship (which, in an inspired touch, is named AndFriend), and is sent into Laagi territory to find out what's there and to investigate what's holding them up on the other side, toward galaxy center. (The centuries-old ship/pilot had been there, but had only been able to drop a few hints about "Paradise.") To Jim's dismay, he is ordered to take Mary's *persona* along embedded in his and both are now part of the ship.

The greater part of the novel is devoted to what they find out about the Laagi—which is quite a bit since they are captured and held on the Laagi planet in the belief

that the ship is an unpiloted drone—and what they find (on escaping the Laagi) on the other side of enemy territory. What they discover is another race, who live in deep space, register on Jim's mentality as many-colored fireflies, and are both very powerful and very naïve, particularly about anything in the way of matter, all of which they regard as simply "holes" in their vision of the fabric of space. Luckily Jim is able to disemship (as in disembody) himself, and come out and play with the fireflies, thereby establishing communication. (Communication gets a bit off-color at times, since they insist on using the word "hole" for any manifestation of matter.) Then comes the fun of getting home and working out how to put all this together for the benefit of mankind.

Dickson, who of course is one of the long-lasting pros of SF, has given us a typical fast-paced space-adventure, first-contact novel that zips along as fast as Jim's ship (or should one say Jimship). One can quibble a few quibbles. Jim and Mary are a rather dreary couple who squabble a lot, even when they've become what amounts to the twin soul of a ship; in fact, the experience seems to make absolutely no difference in their behavior. And the Laagi turn out to be a rather dull race whose major distinction seems to be a severe case of workaholism. But they make a nice contrast to the naïve/intelligent fireflies (sort of Calibans to their Ariels), who are a lot of fun.

Trojan Bore

The Shattered Horse
By S. P. Somtow
Tor, $16.95

The burial site of Homer has long been a matter of conjecture, but it should now be no mystery; a seismographic study of Greece should give the locale of a small persistent shudder which will be Homer revolving hectically in his grave due to the publication of *The Shattered Horse* by S. P. Somtow (who has also written under the name of Somtow Sucharitkul).

This is a sequel to *The Iliad*, or let us say it is an account of what happened after the events of that first of Western epics. It seems that Astyanax, son of Andromache and Hector, wasn't thrown off the city walls after all, but fled and became a shepherd like Uncle Paris. Ten years later, he returns in mid-adolescence to what's left of Troy and attempts to put the pieces together again. He goes about this logically enough by taking off for Greece for revenge and, with luck, to carry off Aunt Helen again and start the Trojan War, Phase Two.

It's about there that one begins to suspect that Hector's son is not very bright (as well as being singularly lacking in charm).

Thereupon, he makes a sort of Grand Tour of the Greek cities. He falls in with Circe, and dines off Odysseus's porcine crew. He meets Orestes and goes home with him to Mycenae, and gets involved in the doings of *that* unpleasant family (Clytemnestra, Electra, and all

that). He goes to Sparta, drops in on Menelaus, Aunt Helen, and their daughter, Hermione, and, by golly, does make off with Helen ("I exist only to be carried off," says she—several times). But he does not succeed in starting up the war again (thank God for small favors). It all sort of peters out in the Elysian Fields in a sort of muddily philosophical way.

Also throw into this some Hittites, some Amazons, an Egyptian mage, the living mummy of the heretic pharoah Akhenaton, a zombie or two, the end of the Bronze Age, and the usual conflict between the patriarchal Greek gods led by Zeus and the earlier Mother Goddess, here called Skyfather and the Snakemother. Generally the aim of retelling or spinning off the great myths is to evoke the spirit of their age while adding something new from our own modern awareness. Somtow totally fails in the first—this novel, despite the research that has gone into it, evokes the Homeric Age about as well as *The Ten Commandments* evokes the time of Moses. As for modern awareness, the general effect is that of a splatter film with a group of characters with classical Greek names. I suppose it's modern awareness of a sort.

SF Lite

GalaxyJane
By Ron Goulart
$2.95, Berkley (paper)

Light fiction is an art in itself. Light *science* fiction is an almost nonexistent art, since most SF writers seem to take themselves oh-so-seriously. Ron Goulart has been writing light SF for quite a while now, and he has it down to a science, as it were. Typical is his latest, *Galaxy Jane*, which is one grand romp from beginning to end (which is not very far—Goulart is aware of one major rule of humor which is *keep it short*). It has a lot of chuckles, and I must admit that at times my decibel count went way over the chuckle level.

The plot is basic thriller, so classic that you can see it about twelve times a week on TV. It's the one about the hotshot reporter out for a scoop tracking down the drug dealers, on which dangerous mission he has to take the big boss's daughter because she's determined to be a reporter. There are several murders, mostly of people that are about to give information, and after trailing shipments of the stuff from hither to yon, there's finally a break and we get to figure out who the Mr. Big of the outfit is, which naturally is somebody we've already met and wouldn't suspect in a thousand years (well, maybe a thousand seconds).

It, of course, is not the plot but the decorations that Goulart puts on it that make the fun. It all takes place in a dizzy intersteller future, and the initial lead to the drug ring is to a movie-making company, currently occupied in creating an epic about the famous female pirate, Galaxy Jane. Much of it is being filmed aboard a giant space-

faring studio-ship, on which our hero and heroine pass themselves off as simply doing a story on moviemaking—oh, to hell with the plot; let's just sample the funny bits. There's the famous Captain Thatcher King of the Royal Mounted Stungunners, the hero of the movie. There are the dangers of the planet Murdstone (where location shooting is taking place) which include brigands, wildmen, devilbats, and dancing bears (there is a fearsomely unlikely explanation for the last named; you'll have to see it to disbelieve it). There's the android replica of the actress playing Galaxy Jane in which (whom?) the drug Zombium is being smuggled, in a very curious portion of her (its?) anatomy, which unscrews. And I particularly liked the music group called The Modern Noise Quartet.

Incidentally, the cover is something of a fraud. It features a Boris painting of Galaxy Jane, eyepatch and all, and the blurb reads: "She was the most beautiful space pirate in the universe . . . and the deadliest!" Since about all there is in the novel to do with GJ are some passing references to the movie script, anyone expecting a piratical space opera is due for a surprise. But, shucks, what they'll get is better . . . some good laughs.

Missionary Alien

Word-Bringer
By Edward Llewellyn
DAW, $2.95 (paper)

Edward Llewellyn was not a young man when he started publishing SF, so in in a way it sounds odd to say that his death last year cut short a promising career. But the handful of novels he wrote did indeed promise more like them: enjoyable action stories with more than a few touches of originality, and an individuality that will be missed.

His last novel, *Word-bringer*, is a good example. The hero is, of all things, a patent attorney, and a very successful one, due to an odd talent he has for spotting untruths or coverups when listening to anyone. It's a talent he much prefers to call intuitive rather than psychic, but that's exactly what it is. As it turns out, he's a low level telepath.

The novel gets off to a rather slow start as the attorney, Richard Ryan, is employed by two other attorneys, whom he had bested in a case a year ago, to listen in on a scientific address by a has-been academic; the exposition tells the reader a bit more about patent attorneying than one wants to know.

But soonish it develops into a free for all chase-and-intrigue thriller, when Richard digs up several other scientists who suddenly came up with startling discoveries after long fallow periods—or in one case, a lovely young mathematician who hadn't discovered *anything* before. The common link is a late-night phone call from someone with a young girl's voice, which somehow triggered the breakthrough.

The girl is tracked down; she,

too, is a low level telepath and has in her possession an ovoid object which not only tells her these things, but takes her mentally to a beautiful city which she thinks of as fairyland. The ovoid hasn't been able to communicate with anyone else, but, due to their shared talent, Richard is also receptive. After some communication difficulties, he finds out that the object is an alien artifact, a remote connected to a large ship resting on the Pacifc seabed manned only by an artificial intelligence.

What's baffling is that the "egg" keeps communicating a string of religious/philosophical banalities along with its scientific goodies, and when it mentally takes Richard to the city (a replica of one on its homeworld), he is preached at unmercifully. He finally figures out that the ship is the equivalent of what the Chinese called a "rice missionary," a Christian missionary who hands out food along with doctrine to keep the "converts" coming back. The scientific novelties (which include an all-purpose glue and molecular memory) are the "rice" by which the converts are caught.

Matters get pretty hectic as the two telepaths are chased acrosss the landscape by various humans after the egg, including a superpatriotic ex-General (intelligent, for once) and the female head of a French industrial espionage outfit, who is also a telepath. And things aren't helped any when the missionary casually hands out the formula for a clean nuclear process which might also be used to easily make nuclear bombs . . .

Things resolve eventually with a couple of Llewellyn's low key twists. I'm sorry that there will be no more of his nice, quirky novels.

Pre-Narnia

Boxen: The Imaginary World of the Young C. S. Lewis
Edited by Walter Hooper
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $13.95

Tolkien's friend, C. S. Lewis, has gone down in the annals of science fiction for his "Space Trilogy" and in the annals of fantasy for the Narnia series. This despite the fact that the former's science is virtually nonexistent and the fiction is heavily laden with message, and the latter is unadulterated Christian propaganda. No matter. The moments of sheer beauty and breathtaking imagination in the stories far transcend any twinges caused by the didacticism, and I'm sure I'm not alone in wanting to go to Lewis's world of Perelandra when I die.

For those Lewis aficionados who would like to know where it began, *Boxen* is the answer. The subtitle, "The Imaginary World of the Young C. S. Lewis," tells it all. Lewis began his literary career as a child with writings about a place called "Animal-Land" which later combined with his brother's beloved India to form the created land of Boxen. The stories that have survived have been collected by Lewis's former secretary. Needless to say,

they are charming, with that particular charm that's almost monopolized by the precocious English children of the beginning of this century who had already read widely but still weren't too sure of their spelling. ("Ah, but this ring was an air-loom.") As Lewis's years increase to a ripe old ten and eleven, the spelling improves but the charm doesn't diminish.

There are short stories, a play, and two "novels" (of fourteen and twenty-two chapters respectively) about Boxen incorporating a large cast of talking animals and amusing people, such as Viscount Puddiphat, who "was reputed to know more about matters sartorial than anyone else alive." There are also many histories and geographies, reflecting the psychological necessity that Lewis shared with Tolkien of making as complete as possible the fantasy worlds that they created perhaps better than anyone else has ever done.

Back To 2100

Revolt In 2100
By Robert A. Heinlein
Baen, $3.50 (paper)

Though Robert Heinlein is one of the three most famous SF writers alive, whose recent works are known far beyond the SF readership, I am continually amazed at how comparatively few readers (even within the SF readership) know the earlier novels. The excuse of non-availability is not valid, since they have been consistently in print over the years.

Now many of them (The "adult" novels as opposed to the "juveniles"—a categorization that is debatable. They are distinguished mostly by the ages of their protagonists.) are being reprinted from a new (for them) publishing house, which will hopefully jolt a number of readers into reading them. The first to appear in a new edition is *Revolt In 2100.*

This is technically not a novel as we know it—back in the pulp magazine days when Heinlein first published, even serialized stories seldom achieved what would now be called book length. The major part of *Revolt In 2100* consists of Heinlein's first work to go beyond the length of a short story. Called "If This Goes On . . ." (initially published in 1940), it's set in a U. S. turned into a theocracy. The government of the Prophet Incarnate is well entrenched, using not only the standard measures of a dictatorship, but advanced psychological techniques. John Lyle is a member of the Angels of the Lord, the elite guard of the prophet, and the novel chronicles his change from a pious, well-indoctrinated upholder of the status quo into a revolutionary, and his adventures as part of an underground organization that succeeds in overthrowing the goverment. The change is initiated by his infatuation for one of the prophet's female servants, whose "religious" functions are apparent to everyone but the naïve, unworldly John. In this story, Heinlein initiated two themes that

would continue throughout his career: religion and revolution.

Also included in the book are two shorter works. "Coventry" is a sequel to "If This Goes On . . ." The revolution has succeeded in establishing a sane society, in which criminals are exiled to Coventry, a large area rendered escape proof, where they are free to live as they will. A misguided romantic, condemned to Coventry as anti-social, learns the error of his ways in the might-makes-right order that passes for government there. Here is another Heinlein "first"—the use of social satire (the society of Coventry is uncomfortably close to our own).

"Misfit" was Heinlein's second published story, about a misfit farm youth with unusual calculating abilities who joins the Space Marines, and saves the project on which his division is working—the conversion of an asteroid into a space station—with his freak talent.

He is referred to only as Libby in the story; Heinlein readers will know that he will be met with again several times in Heinlein's later works (the last time having undergone a sex change, which shows just how radically Heinlein's work has altered over the years).

Watch this space for news of further reprints of works by Heinlein which you should know, but probably don't.

Shoptalk

The ongoing mania for publishing and collecting autographed special editions has reached some sort of indescribable point with the publication of the three-volume *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick* (Underwood-Miller). There is a regular edition at $80.00. That's okay. There is a special numbered, boxed edition at $100.00. That's okay. (Indeed, a bargain as such things go.) But then there is a special, special edition (of one hundred) which has "a signature from Phil Dick, tastefully overlaid and tipped onto the limitation page (from portions of his checks, made available by his estate)." With some other extras, those sets go for $350.00. If such a bit of bizarreness had appeared in Dick's writings, nobody would've believed it.

In our continuing attempt to provide a service to readers by untangling the current state of the ten thousand ongoing series in the field, the following: *The Throne of Scone* by Patricia Kennealy, Book III of the Keltiad, has been published. It is a sequel to *The Copper Crown*, Book II. Book I will be *The Silver Branch*. That's *will be* (Bluejay, $16.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % the Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION Magazine

first annual
Readers' Award

What were *your* favorite stories from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* this year? This is your chance to let us know!

Over the years, our readers have never been shy about letting us know, informally, just which stories in the magazine they found to be the most exciting and thought-provoking. Now's your chance to let us know formally, by ballot, which stories *you* thought were the best stories published in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1986. This is *your* chance to tell *us* what novella, novelette, and short story you liked best this year, out of all the fiction we published. You—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. This is your chance to speak, and let us know which 1986 *IAsfm* stories *you* found the most rewarding.

Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *IAsfm* (pp. 187-190), just to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your favorite three stories in each category. Winners will be decided by Australian ballot. (Only stories from 1986-dated issues of *IAsfm* are eligible; and—we hope, obviously—only stories that were actually published in *IAsfm*... stories from *Analog* or, God help us, *other* magazines, don't count.) All ballots must be postmarked no later than March 1, 1987, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue of *IAsfm*, so vote today!

Best Novella:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Best Novelette:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Best Short Story:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

If you didn't get this issue hot off the press, you missed December's cons (subscribe!). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4721 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. Early evening's usually a good time to phone cons. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, with a musical keyboard.

DECEMBER, 1986

5-7—**TropiCon.** For info, write: **Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307.** Or call: **(305) 392-6462** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Miami FL (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: S. Sucharitkul, B. Linaweaver, Lee Hoffman, G. Ruse and some guy named Dozois.

5-7—**CzarKon. (314) 742-3813.** Rodeway Inn, Eureka MD (near Six Flags St. Louis). Warren Norwood, fan Nancy Nutt, artist Joan Hanke Woods. Annual St. Louis adults-only relax-a-con (light program).

5-7—**ConCon.** Hilton, Lowell MA (near Boston). Con organizers talk shop. Boring for the rest of us.

JANUARY, 1987

2-4—**EveCon, c/o FanTek, Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001.** Washington DC. Zombie Jamboree (limbo contest), masquerade exhibition (no judging), Sunday pizza party. Celebrate New Year's a bit late.

16-18—**ChattaCon, Box 921, Hixson TN 37343.** Chattanooga TN. Niven, C. Stasheff, Zahn, D. Cherry.

16-18—**EsoteriCon, Box 22775, Newark NJ 07101. (201) 743-7647.** New Brunswick NJ. Occult emphasis.

FEBRUARY, 1987

13-15—**ConCeption, 12 Fearnville Terr., Oakwood, Leeds LS8 3DU, UK.** Commemoration and partial re-creation of the first scheduled science fiction convention, held here fifty years ago this month.

13-15—**Boskone, c/o NESFA, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. Had 3,800 in 1986.

20-22—**SFeraCon, Ivanicgradska 41A, Zagreb 41000, Yugoslavia. (41) 21-71-22.** Guests. Relax-a-con.

20-22—**WisCon, c/o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701.** Connie Willis, Avedon Carol. Feminism and SF.

20-22—**ConTemplation, c/o Summers, MA406, Medicine, UMC, 1 Hospital Dr., Columbia, MO 65202. (314) 882-2237 (days).** Guests, dealers, video, gaming, pool of eels, strange rites. At UMC Union.

MARCH, 1987

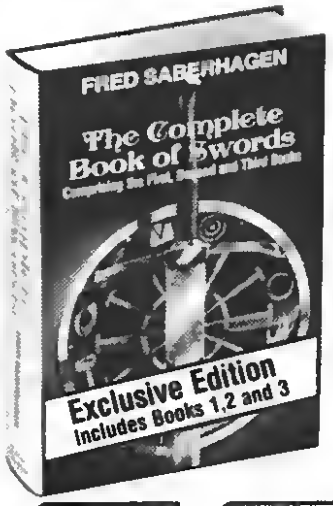
6-8—**ConCave, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134.** Park City (Park Mammoth Resort) KY. Jane & Scott Dennis.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, UK. WorldCon 1987.

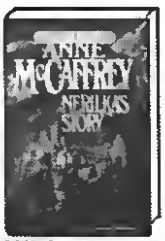
SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Temple AZ 85282.** The NASFiC, held since the WorldCon is abroad.



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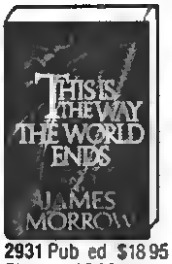
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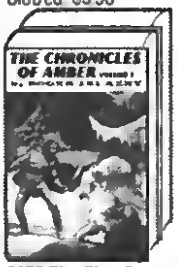
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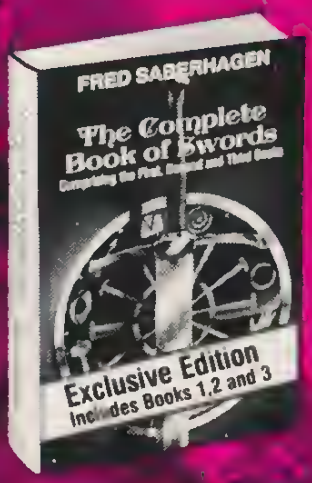
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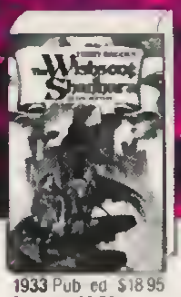


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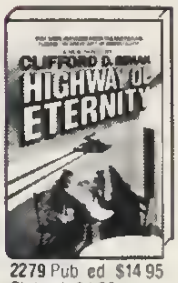
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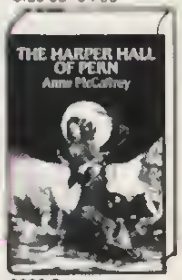
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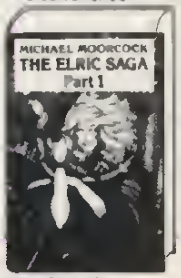
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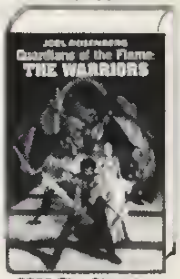
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